

## The Darkness Within

### Prologue

The ordinary-looking little house at Number Four, Privet Drive, stood peaceful and quiet in the eerie predawn hours of September first. All its inhabitants lay in their beds enjoying the last few moments of sleep before a busy day. All, except a boy in the smallest bedroom. He too was lying on his bed, but he wasn't enjoying a moment of peace. In the darkness of his room, he writhed on his bed, the sheets tangled around his small frame and his ever-messy hair getting even messier as he silently whimpered in the throes of a nightmare.

*He stood in the Department of Mysteries, in front of the Veil.*

*He stood there watching. Doing nothing.*

*And Sirius kept falling. His eyes were locked on Harry's. He kept falling. Dying. In front of Harry.*

*He stood there, doing nothing.*

*And then he saw Bellatrix. Laughing.*

*He turned to face her. He felt all the anger, all the guilt and hatred, all the frustration well up inside him, and he cast it. He pointed his wand at the laughing witch and said the word.*

Crucio

*He watched. The woman was there, lying in front of him on the floor. Her lips were moving; she was screaming.*

*He said it. Crucio. He felt the word worming its way out of his mouth, out of his heart. He felt it evolving, changing. He opened his mouth.*

Avada Kedavra

*The screaming was gone, her lips didn't move. Everything was quiet.*

The Boy Who Lived sat up awake on his bed, covered with sweat. His heart was beating erratically in his ears and he was trembling

uncontrollably as he tried to get the dream out of his mind. After a minute, he stood up, made his way to the bathroom and the real world.

Harry crept quietly downstairs and started on the tea, which was to accompany the health-feast of half a grapefruit and a slice of toast, which they all had to have, so as not to make his overweight cousin Dudley unhappy with the diet he had been on for over a year now. Still no results showing.

Harry secretly suspected Dudley more than made up for the lack of food at home while hanging out with his friends and terrorising the smaller and younger inhabitants of Little Whinging.

“Boy!” came the voice of his uncle Vernon, as he was startled out of his daydreams. “What are you still doing here? Go get your things.” And so he did, thankful that the summer was finally over. The only teenager in Britain who was happy to return to school.

An hour later, his uncle’s car pulled into King’s Cross train station and Harry got out, dragging his large school trunk after him and carrying Hedwig’s cage, ignoring the looks of fascination he got from the Muggles going about their business in the busy station. When he got to the barrier that he knew led to Platform Nine and Three Quarters, he took a deep breath and stepped through. And suddenly, the world was filled with light and colour and noise. The summer he had spent in a nightmarish haze was really over. He was really going home, going back to Hogwarts.

He ignored the whispers, the pointing fingers of first years and the chant of “Harry Potter! Harry Potter ... look, is that Harry Potter? ... died ... Potter ... He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named ... battle ... Potter ...” that seemed to be emanating from all around him and got on the train.

Harry boarded the train, found an empty compartment and sat down, blissfully alone for the time. Alone to think about what to say to his friends, from whom he had not heard the entire summer. Even though he had had all summer to consider whether to tell anybody about the prophecy, Harry still hadn’t made a decision. A big part of him wanted to tell his friends, to seek their advice and their help in the battle to come. But another nagging voice kept ringing in his ears: *and either*

*must die at the hand of the other ...* He was the chosen one, only he. He was the one destined to save the wizarding world by becoming a killer, a murderer like the one he sought to destroy. And Harry knew he could do it. He knew he could kill if he had to.

He didn't want to think about the expressions on his friends' faces when they would realise this. When they would understand that there really was nothing they could do, no way they could help him. It was his burden, his destiny; his and his alone. Harry thought of Ron, his best friend, who always seemed to believe that he was not important, not good enough. How Ron always thought himself the sidekick, never the hero, and how this would cement the notion. And Harry decided not to tell.

Harry thought of Hermione, of how she always wanted to know and eventually *did* know everything, how her face lit up with the thrill of the hunt for answers. He knew there were no answers now and as he imagined the disappointment in her face, he decided not to tell. Then he thought of Ginny and of how much she had already suffered at the hands of Tom Riddle. And decided not to tell. So he sat, his decision finally made, and calmly waited for his friends.

Suddenly, the doors banged open and there they were. First was Hermione, levitating her trunk before her and a large book under her arm, with her finger stuck between the pages.

"Hey, Harry," she greeted, sitting down next to him and throwing her arms around him. The book lay discarded on the bench as she stared searchingly into his eyes.

"How are you doing, Harry?"

"Fine, Hermione ... I'm fine," came Harry's muffled reply from the region of her shoulder. Ron's face swam into view as the redhead clapped his friend on the back and smiled. "Good to see you, mate."

"Yeah, you too. So, where's Ginny?"

"She decided to check in on some girls from her year ... to give us some alone time, she said."

Harry smiled for the first time in what felt like months. "That was nice of her."

Then his attention returned to Hermione, who still hadn't let go of him.

"Are you sure you're all right? We haven't heard anything from you all summer. Nothing, not a letter, not a phone call. *Nothing!*" Her concerned tone turned somewhat angry as she let go of him.

Harry stared at her. "Well, I haven't heard from you either," he said, feeling a little confused.

"But Harry, you know we couldn't contact you ... it wasn't safe. Professor Dumbledore told you about the security restrictions last year; the mail could be intercepted by the Death Eaters and this year, with the Ministry of Magic acknowledging You-Know-Who's —"

"Voldemort's," interrupted Harry.

"Alright, Voldemort's return, the security is tighter than ever, and when we tried sending letters to you, they just kept coming back! When we asked Professor Dumbledore about it, he said he had made you Unplottable, so that nobody could send you mail. Just in case Death Eaters sent you some cursed letter or maybe even a Portkey," she paused for a breath and then continued, "But that doesn't mean you couldn't have written to us, Harry."

"Hermione, remember how little I'm always told," said Harry. "Did it by chance cross your mind that I didn't *know*? Nobody wrote to me and I figured that I was isolated from the wizarding world for security reasons, as you said ..."

At that point, Ron butted in, "At least you could have tried writing, you know? Or that *phellytone* thingy Hermione has."

"I don't think my Aunt and Uncle would have let me try phoning, Ron," Harry said sarcastically. "They had a rather happy summer, with no interruptions from the freaks as they call wizards, so me voluntarily bringing it back into their lives ... well, let's just say they wouldn't have been very happy about it."

Harry and his friends sat in contemplative silence for a while. Then Ron asked what Harry had done during the summer. After an answer of "Nothing, really", Hermione started telling Harry about her summer, spent travelling in continental Europe with her parents and visiting Viktor Krum in Bulgaria.

By the time she had finished entertaining them with her tales of adventures in the magnificent museums and libraries of the continent, Ginny had come in on the heels of the trolley lady and Ron was busy trying to choose between Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans and Cauldron Cakes.

Ginny greeted Harry shyly, and sat down next to her brother.

Hermione opened her book again and settled in for some before-the-term studying while Ron challenged Ginny to a game of Wizard's Chess as Harry sat there contently. All the evil of Voldemort and his grim destiny was forgotten for the moments of peace and normalcy with his friends as the Hogwarts Express travelled north.

After some time, Hermione sat up and instructed her friends to change into their school robes as Hogsmeade station was only fifteen minutes away. The teenagers pulled the black robes over their Muggle outfits; Hermione and Ron pinned the prefects' badges on.

"Oooh, Ginny, congratulations! Why didn't you tell us?" came Hermione's excited cry, just as Harry noticed that he was the only one in the compartment without the small golden addition to the robes. He went over to Ginny and hugged her saying "congratulations" quietly into her ear. With sudden alarm, he noticed the deep blush that had started spreading over the younger girl's face at his touch and let go so quickly he didn't see the hurt look Ginny got in her eyes at his brusque retreat.

Hermione swatted Ron on the shoulder and exclaimed, "At least you could have told me, Ron!"

"Ouch! Hermione." Ron backed off. "I didn't know either! That little sister of mine has been very secretive with the information, obviously."

"Sorry, Hermione. It's true, I didn't want to make a big deal about it," Ginny said quietly.

"Why on earth not? This is a great thing, Ginny. It's a recognition of your academic achievements and you should be proud of it," came Hermione's surprised voice.

"Academic achievements?" Ron snorted. "How do explain *my* badge, then?"

For once, Hermione was silenced by surprise. "Well, there are probably other factors involved as well," she conceded, "but that doesn't mean you're not smart, Ron."

By now, the famous Weasley blush was spreading over both present family members, Harry noticed with some amusement.

The conversation came to a screeching halt along with the train as the Hogwarts Express reached Hogsmeade Station. The students started filing out of the train and trudged towards the waiting coaches. Harry and co waived in passing to Hagrid, who as per usual was bellowing for first years to come to him, and piled into a coach. Harry watched as Hogwarts castle loomed over the lake, magnificent and ancient and always welcoming. He, Ron and Hermione walked in the huge front doors to the Great Hall and sat down to watch the Sorting and enjoy the welcoming feast as Ginny once again went to join her classmates.

All the houses had settled down at their tables and the students sat facing the Sorting Hat, when the Great Doors opened and in came Professor McGonagall at the head of a large group of frightened first years.

The old crumpled hat on the lone stool before the teachers table burst into song.

*You may think I am silly*

*You may think I am mad*

*But I am the most important hat*

*You have ever placed on your head.*

*I am the Hogwarts Sorting Hat*

*It is my job to tell you where you go*

*Where you find the friends to know*

*Whether you are a Gryffindor*

*Whose bravery is known to all,*

*Or are you clever as is needed*

*For Ravenclaw;*

*You may be a Slytherin,*

*Most cunning and ambitious*

*Or Hufflepuff, where loyalty*

*And hard work are heeded;*

*But no matter where you are sorted*

*Remember that all houses*

*Are equal and just as needed.*

One by one the first years were sorted into houses and welcomed with clapping hands. After the final eleven year old was sorted, a Ravenclaw, Professor Dumbledore stood up.

“Welcome, students, to Hogwarts. I am glad to see all the old faces returning and so many new ones to join us in this institution of learning. It is a dark time, but you must enjoy the opportunities of refuge and peace that Hogwarts offers you, and the more children we have here, safe, the better. So let us put aside the house rivalries and have fun. Note you, not too much fun.” He peered smiling over the half-moon glasses at some students and continued, “Now, I have been informed by Mr Filch that there are twenty three new additions

to the list of forbidden items, which you can read on his office door. As most of our older students should know by now, the Forbidden Forest that borders Hogwarts is just that, forbidden. Also, let us welcome our new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, Professor Saims.”

The thin young man on Professor McGonagall’s right-hand side stood as the students clapped politely.

“I trust you will make him feel most welcome. That takes care of the serious business. Join me in our school song and then if you please ... dig in!”

The interesting cacophony of the school song sang to hundreds of different tunes filled the Great Hall for a few minutes. Then the welcoming feast began in earnest as huge quantities of food appeared on the silver plates.

After everybody had eaten to their heart’s content, Ginny Weasley – one of the fifth-year prefects – stood up and called, “Gryffindor first-years! First years, follow me!” and led the small children out of the hall towards the Gryffindor common room.

The older students started trailing behind as Ron remarked to Harry, “I can’t believe we were so little once. These kids just keep getting smaller and smaller, don’t you think?”

Harry nodded with a smile tugging at his lips as he looked up at his 6 foot 3 friend and followed the crowd to the portrait of the Fat Lady. There, the prefects informed the first year students how to gain access to the common room by telling the password – *Skiving Snackboxes* – to the portrait and also gave the usual lecture about not forgetting and not writing down the password. When that was mentioned, some people sneaked rather pointed looks at Neville, who seemed totally oblivious.

Once in the common room, the prefects led the first-years up to their dormitories while older students sat on the various couches and armchairs around the fire and talked about the summer, getting reacquainted with their friends.



Harry considered the peaceful picture for a moment and then walked up the boys' staircase, slumped down on his bed and promptly fell asleep.

## **Chapter 1: Potions and Girls**

As Tuesday morning dawned, Harry Potter lay peacefully sleeping in his large four-poster bed in the Gryffindor sixth year boys' dormitory. Then, the sleeping wasn't so peaceful anymore as suddenly the warmth receded and he opened his eyes to discover his best friend Ron standing at the foot of his bed, an evil grin on his face and Harry's blanket in his hands.

"Uuumh, Ron! What's the big idea ... lemme sleep a little longer ..."  
Harry mumbled into his pillow.

"Time to get up Harry. We have ten minutes to get to breakfast! Come on, hurry up," Ron practically shouted in his ear, or so Harry thought in his sleepy daze. Harry stood up and strolled into the bathroom to have a quick shower before going down to the common room with Ron. Being as late as they were, the boys found the room empty, as the students of Gryffindor house had already left for breakfast on their first day of school. Harry and Ron walked into the Great Hall and sat next to Hermione on their usual spots, as far as possible from the Slytherin table, which was next to theirs, and started piling breakfast on their plates.

"Morning Harry, Ron," said Hermione over the large volume she was currently reading. "Sleep well?"

"Morning," came the reply from both boys sitting on either side of her as the amount of food on their plates kept decreasing. A few minutes passed in silence; then Professor McGonagall could be seen leaving the teachers' table and coming towards her house with a stack of papers in her hand.

"Oh, look." Pointed out Hermione. "Professor McGonagall is giving out our timetables. You know, I wrote to her in the summer and asked if I could take Advanced Arithmancy and Ancient Runes. Usually it's one or the other, you can't take both. But I thought they are both useful and as I don't know for certain yet what I want to do after graduation ..." she trailed off as Professor McGonagall reached them and handed the three teenagers their timetables. Ron took a pause stuffing the food in his mouth to look at his.

“Oh, sh...”

“Ron, language! You’re a prefect, you must be on exemplary behaviour for the younger students,” huffed Hermione.

“Sorry, Hermione,” said Ron. “But look at your schedule! The first lesson of the year. Potions. I mean, it couldn’t get any worse, could it?”

“Oh, don’t be such a baby, Ron. It’s NEWT level potions. I’m sure Professor Snape will behave in an appropriate manner. Only students he accepted will be in the class, so I’m sure he won’t pick on you. Besides, advanced potions ...”

“Advanced poisons, you mean.”

“... are really interesting,” concluded Hermione.

Harry chipped in, “Yeah, Ron. I’m sure Professor Snape won’t try to poison you ...”

Hermione interrupted, “See, Ron, Harry can be mature about this. Why can’t *you*?”

“... if he’ll try to poison anyone, it’ll be me. So, my friend, as long as you see me alive and breathing in potions, you are totally safe.”

Hermione stared at them for a moment, then stood up and muttered, “Boys!” She picked up her book-bag and made her way out of the Great Hall towards the dungeon staircase.

“What’s the matter with her?” said Ron, looking at Harry confusedly.

“I have absolutely no idea, Ron,” Harry said, managing to keep a straight face.

The boys stood up and followed the route to potions class that their female friend had taken moments before. They reached the classroom and went in to discover only six two-people desks in the classroom. The boys spied Hermione sitting alone at one of the front desks and made their way over to sit at the desk behind her.

However, before they managed to sit down, Snape swept into the classroom in a cloud of billowing black robes.

“Welcome to NEWT potions,” he said. “Some of you here are expected students with a talent for potions.” Snape glanced at Draco Malfoy while saying that. “Others have barely scraped in and I expect a lot of hard work from you. And some people ... apparently have friends in high places,” he concluded, looking rather pointedly at Harry.

“Since there are obviously very different skill levels represented here, I have paired you up for the remainder of the year. Weaker students with stronger ones. By the time of your NEWT exams at the end of your seventh year, I expect you all to be able to pass. Now, the list of pairs is on my table. I’m sure nobody will have a problem with it,” he sneered. “You may be seated.”

The students crowded around the teacher’s desk at the front of the classroom. A sigh of relief could be heard as Ron discovered that he was paired with Hermione.

“Well, mate, I guess that proves I’m not so good in potions. Who did you get?”

Harry looked down the list and groaned. “Malfoy.”

“Ouch, tough luck, mate.”

“Well, what are you waiting for? Take your seats and take out your potions supplies,” Snape commanded. Harry made his way to the desk, which was next to Hermione and Ron’s, and sat down. A moment later, the blond-haired Slytherin settled down on the chair next to him.

“Potter,” he hissed. “I don’t know why I’m stuck with you ... but don’t you dare mess up. I excel in potions and I intend to keep it that way.”

Harry decided not to even grace him with an answer and set to the task of unpacking his potions ingredients. The rest of the lesson passed in relative quiet, with Harry losing only ten points from Gryffindor for disturbing his lab partner by coughing.

When the class was over, the three Gryffindor sixth years in NEWT potions made their way out of the dungeons, Hermione apparently having forgiven them their behaviour at breakfast. Harry and Ron took off towards Trelawney's tower for Divination while Hermione went to her Ancient Runes class.

After lunch, the Gryffindors had Care of Magical Creatures with Hagrid. The Trio walked down the snaking path to Hagrid's hut while discussing the lessons they had had so far, with a few choice words about Snape's choice of lab partners.

When they reached the hut, the teenagers saw that just like the rest of NEWT level classes, this lesson also had the four houses grouped together. Being an easy class, it meant that the entire front yard of Hagrid's hut was filled with students.

"All righ', people," Hagrid said. "Welcome to Advanced Care of Magical Creatures. Today we are startin' with gremlins. I see there are so many of you, you migh' want to pair up so tha' each pair has one creature to look afte'."

The students started looking around for a friend to pair up with.

"Right, then. Harry you're with me," said Hermione in a no-nonsense tone. "I'm partnered with Ron in potions, it's only fair." Harry nodded and, after seeing that Ron had paired off with Neville, walked with Hermione towards the paddock where the cages with gremlins were kept.

Some time into the lesson, Hagrid allowed the students to open the cages in order to try to communicate with their gremlins. Suddenly, a loud shriek could be heard as Neville Longbottom got bitten in the hand by the little creature entrusted to his and Ron's care. To the sound of laughter and degrading comments from the Slytherins, Ron offered to accompany Neville to the hospital wing to have his hand looked at. The two boys left and as the lesson drew to an end, so did everybody else, but Harry and Hermione decided to stay a while longer to talk to Hagrid as it was the last lesson of the day. But even after graciously consuming some of Hagrid's rock cakes with their tea, they didn't manage to weasel out of him what the Order had been up to all summer. They figured some progress must have been made in

the fight, with the acknowledgement of Voldemort's return after Sirius Black's death at the Department of Mysteries the previous spring. When Hermione mentioned Sirius's name Harry got very quiet and she took it as her cue to leave.

The teenagers said their goodbyes to Hagrid and started up the path towards the castle when Hermione slowed down and said,

"Harry, have you talked to anybody about what happened? I mean what happened to Sirius at the Ministry."

Harry sighed, "I know what you mean, Hermione. And yes, I talked to Dumbledore about it."

"Did you? I mean *really* talked about it, because you should ... you know ... so you could say goodbye."

"Thank you, Hermione, but I don't want to talk about it right now. And I have said goodbye. I saw him die! There can't be any unresolved issues there, I know he is dead and gone and that's it." Harry's voice started rising in pitch.

"Ok, if you're sure." Hermione backed off and the rest of the walk to the castle was silent.

Later, after dinner, Harry was sitting in the common room in the armchair farthest from the fire, with the open potions textbook in his hands and staring off to space. The talk with Hermione had set his mind wondering on Sirius again and consecutively the prophecy. He went to bed that night with a heavy heart and woke up several times during the night from the dreadful nightmares he had been having all summer.

A few weeks later found him sitting in the common room again staring off to space, when the commotion near the portrait hole caught his attention and he made his way over to see what the fuss was about.

In the immediate vicinity of the portrait hole, a highly agitated Neville Longbottom was arguing with the fifth-year male prefect about something. Through the open hole Harry could see Luna Lovegood standing just outside the entrance.

“What’s going on here?” he asked.

Neville looked relieved at his arrival. “ Harry! Would you please tell Jim that Luna can come in our common room. It’s not like she’s spying on us or anything, we just want to spend some time together.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “We? Neville is there something you’d like to tell us?”

The prefect chose that minute to intervene. “This is the *Gryffindor* common room. No other houses allowed, girlfriend or not.”

Harry rounded on the prefect. “Well, Luna just happens to be a personal friend of myself as well as the future head girl *and* both of the Weasley prefects. You want to take it up with them?”

The young prefect recognised a lost battle and retreated from the portrait hole to allow Luna entrance to the common room.

“So ... girlfriend, eh? Congratulations, Neville, Luna. When did that happen?” asked Harry as he accompanied the couple to the corner couch by the windows.

“After the Ministry, Luna and I ... we started writing to each other and then visiting in the summer ... and ... eventually, you know ...” Neville trailed off as he and Luna settled into the loveseat.

Harry left the couple to their own devices and retreated to his usual chair. As the evening went on, the common room grew quiet as the students left for their dormitories for the night. Harry was getting up to leave himself when he noticed Ginny Weasley looking at him from the girls’ staircase. He remembered the blushing incident on the train and groaned inwardly as Ginny made her way through the common room to stand next to him.

“Hi Harry,” she said. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing right now,” Harry answered. “Why?”

“I just thought we could talk. You know we’ve barely exchanged a couple of sentences since school began ...”

“Yeah. I guess we’ve both been kind of busy.”

“But you’re not busy right now, are you?” said Ginny, while settling on the side of his armchair. “We could talk about Neville and Luna. Did you know they were dating?”

“Nah, first heard about it today.”

“It’s nice though ... they both had the courage to admit they liked each other,” she said suggestively and looked straight into the eyes of the now panicking boy. Harry tried to get up from the chair, avoiding her eyes, but he couldn’t just brush off her hand that he realised was covering his own by now. He looked up.

“Ginny, I...”

She quieted him by trailing her fingers through his messy dark hair and forcing the boy to face her. Time seemed to freeze as he saw her face coming closer and closer. He gulped. She was so beautiful. So close that he could smell her hair, count every freckle around her deep amber eyes. Touch the perfect pink lips. He closed his eyes, feeling his mind fogging, instincts taking over reason, and pressed his lips to hers.

Time started moving again. He was sitting in the common room with Ginny Weasley in his arms, kissing her. *Kissing her?* He sat up abruptly and let go of her, the sixteen-year-old boy in him protesting the sudden loss of warm female flesh.

“I’m sorry ...” he got out. “Oh God, I’m sorry Ginny. I didn’t mean to let go like that.”

The fire-haired girl looked up at him. There was hurt in her eyes, and she said quietly, “You don’t like me that way, do you?”

Harry looked at her with the same feeling of loss in his eyes. He shook his head.

“No, I don’t ...” The words were coming faster now. “I thought that maybe... maybe I did. But when I kissed you ... It felt like ...”



“Kissing a brother,” said Ginny. “Or a sister, in your case,” she added with a twinkle returning to her bright brown eyes.

“Yeah, like a little sister.”

Ginny smiled and said mischievously, “Well, I guess the perfect fairy tale wedding I’ve pictured since I was five won’t have a green-eyed groom anymore.”

Harry smiled in answer. “Guess not, but you’re welcome to an extra brother, to scowl at and threaten the possible groom, just to ensure he’ll make you happy.”

“Great,” she cried. “Just my luck. To be born with six overprotective brothers ... and then acquire an honorary one on the way!”

Harry laughed with her, happy to be included in a family. Together they left the common room for their respective dormitories.

Neither noticed that one of the armchairs by the fire had been occupied during their encounter and the talk that followed it. The girl in the said armchair leaned back, watching the retreating backs of the friends, and stared into the flames with a small smile tugging at her lips.

## **Chapter 2: Quidditch and Revelations**

Harry, who had been named Quidditch captain of the Gryffindor house team, decided to hold the try-outs for the team on the third weekend of September.

So, Saturday afternoon found him and Ron, who he'd named co-captain and team strategist, standing in the drizzling rain out on the Quidditch Pitch in front of the tens of hopeful Gryffindors, who had turned up to compete for the available spots on the team. And there were available spots. Indeed all the positions were available, except Seeker and Keeper, played by Harry and Ron respectively, since everybody else had left school the previous year. Thankfully Harry's lifelong ban on Quidditch had been lifted and he could be Seeker again, but that also meant that Ginny, the third member of the team, was out of a position to play in.

In consequence the first order of business was to find a suitable position for Ginny to play in. Taking into account that Ginny possessed the most important traits of a successful Seeker -- agility and speed, the boys decided to have her try out for Chaser. A position, which utilizes the same qualities in addition to teamwork.

It was obvious from the word go that Ginny was ideal for the spot. Now, the only problem was finding two more Chasers, who could work well together, and with Ginny.

The Beaters turned out to be a time-honored and -tested classic. Third year twins in the spirit of Fred and George, Hogwarts legends for Quidditch ... and other reasons.

Even though both Harry and Ron were sure they got together the best available team, and could tell Professor McGonagall with a clear conscience that the Quidditch Cup was as good as theirs, the boys still put together a hard training schedule. For the first time Ron agreeing with Hermione that there is no such thing as over preparing or in this case -- overtraining.

So the weeks passed, busy with schoolwork and Quidditch training, Harry had little time to spare to thoughts of the prophecy and his stark destiny. Even the nightmares had subsided, because of the sheer

physical exhaustion he felt every night as he dropped, nearly unconscious onto his bed.

Time passed and before anyone could even notice, Halloween had arrived. The anniversary of his parents death fifteen years ago. That brought back to the forefront of his mind Sirius' death, and Voldemort and his prophecy-proclaimed destiny.

On the night of the Halloween Feast, he felt severely depressed and as he sat down next to Hermione at the Gryffindor table both of his friends noticed that something was most definitely wrong.

"Harry, mate. What's up?" asked Ron, watching his friends face, the pile of mashed potatoes in front of him momentarily forgotten.

"Oh, it's nothing ..." Harry answered, hoping they'd leave it at that.

Hermione, however, was not willing to let it go. "You're parents ... it's the anniversary of their death. Right?"

"Yeah. I guess everyone knows that ..." said Harry, then pulled himself together and continued, "Anyway I don't want to talk about that at a feast, so just drop it, ok?"

Hermione looked into his eyes for a moment and said quietly, "Ok, but some day soon we are going to talk about it ... and about Sirius."

Harry hesitated, "Sure, Hermione ..."

Ron, oblivious to the conversation, was already piling all the tasty Halloween treats on his plate. Harry followed suit and the somber conversation was forgotten for the moment.

After the feast the students returned to their common rooms and in Gryffindor Tower the party continued in a much less subdued manner than in the Great Hall, as bottles of Butterbeer magically appeared and the WIZARDING Wireless was turned up and the sounds of a popular song by the Weird Sisters filled the room. Harry excused himself, by saying he was tired and going to bed, in order to escape the impending conversation Hermione had threatened him with.

Harry walked up the staircase and flopped down on the bed, pulling the curtains closed behind him and lay on his back, staring blindly up.

For the first time in nearly two months, he couldn't get the prophecy out of his mind. His mind started wondering. He thought about the future he was destined to have, he thought of all the plans he'd made with his friends in the fifth year. He thought about becoming an Auror, he thought about becoming a killer. He thought of dying before ever leaving school. He thought of the battles he'd fought so far and the battles lying ahead. And accompanying all those thoughts he heard Trelawney's eerie voice speaking the prophecy that was going to change his life .... *the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord ... and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives....* The words kept on ringing in his head as his exhausted brain succumbed to sleep. And sleep he did, with pictures and sound of old memories and nightmares conquering his mind once again.

*Harry was walking down a corridor in Hogwarts, when he heard it....*

*The soft hissing that seemed to be coming from everywhere ... the heir ... heir....*

*And suddenly he was in the Great Hall looking at a large snake....*

Parselmouth ... evil, only dark wizards....

*The hissing was back ....*

*He stood a sword in hand, the blood was dripping onto the floor....*

*Cedric's body was lying in front of him....*

Avada Kedavra.

Crucio.

*Bellatrix Lestrange's body lying in front of him....*

*A bloody sword....*

Must die.

Crucio.

Something unforgivable....

Kill or be killed.

*Walking down the hallway at Hogwarts....*

*The blood dripping from the sword....*

*Red eyes, burning....*

Kill.

*Blood everywhere.*

He jumped up from the bed, staring wildly around, his clothes drenched in sweat. *A dream, nothing but a dream*, he thought and laid back into the bed in the hopeless attempt to fall asleep again that night.

Half an hour later he gave up all pretense and got up from his bed, and walked down the stairs to the common room to sit in a chair near the fire, planning to stare at the flames until the morning came and with it light and people, and the normalcy of classes and homework.

That plan was put to rest when he made his way to the armchair near the fire and noticed it was already occupied.

"Hermione, what are you doing up so late?" he asked in a quiet tone of voice. The bushy-haired girl looked up from her book and smiled at her friend.

"Couldn't sleep ... so decided to read a little ... what about you? What are you doing up so late?"

"About the same. Couldn't sleep," Harry answered and sat into the comfy chair next to her.

"Nightmares?"

Harry was startled and blurted out, "How'd you know?"

"Harry, I've been your friend for over five years and watched all last year you suffer nightmares about Cedric. Knowing you I'd guess now you have them about Sirius as well. You know, since we're both up right now ... we could talk about it ... Sirius and your nightmares I mean."

"Hermione, I'm not sure I want to talk about it. I'm dealing with it in my own way and let's just leave it at that. Please." Harry looked at Hermione seriously.

"And about the nightmares... They are rare; haven't had one in months," he said in a chipper tone, trying to lighten the mood.

Hermione wasn't one to give up easily, but she was also the smartest witch Hogwarts had seen in a century and she knew her friend well. So, this time she let it go and looked for another topic of conversation. Harry was faster, however, and asked with a sly look in his eyes, "And you, why couldn't you sleep? Thinking about something special?"

"I don't know what you mean, Harry Potter," Hermione was indignant. "I just wanted to read for a while."

"Oh, come on, Hermione. The whole school knows Ron has a crush on you since the Yule Ball our fourth year."

"What are you talking about, Harry?" She seemed truly confused.

"You mean you really haven't noticed, Hermione." He looked at her. "The entire school is making bets on when you'll finally get together."

Suddenly Hermione seemed very nervous. "Harry, has Ron told you anything about me? Has he told you he liked me, have you heard anything else except the school rumors?"

"Not in so many words, Hermione, but I'm sure he likes you like a ... you know ..." He seemed pleased to inform her of that and upon noticing the growing alarm in her eyes continued, "You like him too, don't you, Hermione?"

She looked at the fire for a moment, contemplating the flames and then glanced at Harry. "You know that people in school are also taking bets on when you and Ginny Weasley start dating?"

Harry sighed, "I know. But what has that got to do with you and Ron?"

"I saw you, you know ... talking to Ginny...."

"And?"

"Any ideas how I could have the same talk with Ron, without hurting his feelings?" She still wasn't looking at him.

"You mean?"

"Yeah, I mean that he's like a brother to me, my best friend ... but that's all." She was looking at him again, with a small searching smile the boy didn't seem to notice.

"Well, that's a mess. You'd better talk to him soon, Hermione, before he gets his hopes up and eventually even more hurt." He stood up to leave for his dormitory.

"I will, Harry. Soon. Goodnight," the girl said watching him disappear up the stairs.

"Goodnight," came the muffled reply as Harry made his way to his room. He sat down his bed for the second time that night. He felt sad for Ron, his best friend, and at the same time, strangely relieved. And as he closed his eyes no nightmarish visions of blood and swords appeared, instead he saw a brown-haired girl sitting in front a warm fire and as sleep engulfed him, the Boy-Who-Lived felt only peace.

The next day he waked well rested from a good nights sleep and walked to breakfast with Ron, sat down in his usual spot next to Hermione, and proceeded to act like any other teenage boy; eating too much breakfast, complaining about the day's lessons and teachers, in particular Snape, and stealing furtive glances at the girl he liked.

And if said girl noticed that one of her friends was acting happier than in a long time, she didn't say a word about it. She just sat there enjoying the conversation with her friends, stealing her own looks at the boy.

The only one to notice anything different in the behavior of the two people, might have been the third party of this triangle, but he was busy as well. Working up the courage to approach the girl he liked and say just that.

The three people sat there, all happy in the moment for their own reasons. Not one suspecting that this was their last moment of innocence. A breakfast of three friends, the Golden Trio of Gryffindor. It was about to come crashing down around them, destroyed from within; by jealousy, distrust and above all a destiny, undeniable in its darkness.

Hermione, Ron and Harry got up from the table, the breakfast finished, ready for the days first lesson at Hagrid's; and walked out the Hogwarts Great Doors, the girl walking between the two boys, all laughing and talking.

*... to be continued ...*



### **Chapter 3: A Destiny Chosen**

The Monday after the Halloween feast, Harry was sitting on the floor in the sixth-year boys' dormitory, head resting on his bed and an open potions text in his hands.

"Hey, Harry," said Ron, coming through the door. "What are you doing here? I've been looking all over for you."

"I wanted someplace quiet to study for the potions test tomorrow, but you found me anyway. What did you want to talk about?" Harry stood up and promptly sat down on his bed, motioning for Ron to come over.

The taller boy stood uncertainly for a moment and then said, "You know, I should probably be studying potions too, can't expect Hermione to help me through a test," he quipped, "so we'll talk later, ok? It's nothing important." He started to back out of the room.

"You sure?" called Harry after him.

"Yeah, it's nothing, really," answered Ron while going downstairs, where he settled into a red armchair and pulled out his own potions text. After a while, Hermione climbed in through the portrait hole, sat in her usual place near the fire and opened a book. Suddenly, the redhead's attention started to waver and his eyes, instead of focusing on the material for the test, strayed to the girl, observing the games the firelight played in her hair.

Hermione could feel his eyes on her, but was too scared to acknowledge his gaze, certain that if she did, the peace would be shattered. Consequently, she stayed immersed in her book as the minutes and then hours of the evening ticked by.

On Tuesday morning, the three Gryffindors in Advanced Potions made their way to the dungeon classroom and took their seats, Hermione next to Ron and Harry next to Draco Malfoy. As the students were whispering last minute revisions, Professor Snape stalked into the classroom and stood rigidly in front of his desk, glaring at each and every one of his students.

"Today's test," he sneered, "is going to be practical."

A gasp went through the classroom at this bit of news as the students had prepared for a written examination.

“With your desk partner, you are going to brew a potion of my choice, without using your books or your notes.” He grinned quite evilly, “The potions are going to be antidotes to some rather ... *unpleasant* substances. After completion, you are going to test your antidotes on yourself. Whoever manages to walk out of this classroom on his or her own two feet passes. You will find the name of the potion for which you must brew an antidote on the parchment in front of you,” Snape added, and with a flick of his wand, said parchments appeared on the desks.

“You may begin.”

Harry was cleaning up his potions supplies and putting them in his bag while Draco Malfoy poured the completed potion into a glass vial for Snape.

“Mr. Malfoy, Potter,” came the voice of their Potions master, who was standing in the front of the classroom.

“Have you completed your antidote?” the professor asked.

At Malfoy’s affirmative nod, he motioned for the boys to come and stand at the front of the classroom and asked who of them would be testing the potion.

“Potter can do it,” Malfoy sneered.

Harry shrugged and took the steaming vial of potion from his teacher’s hand. He gulped it down in one go and shuddered, as he was quite instantaneously covered from head to toe with *warts*. Feeling deeply disgusted, Harry picked up the vial of antidote he and Malfoy had brewed and downed it. For a second he felt as though his whole body was burning. Then it was over and he was feeling back to normal.

Snape looked at Malfoy as he said, “Correctly brewed; you passed.” He motioned the two boys out of the way of the next pair, a couple of Ravenclaws, and added as an afterthought:

“Oh, and Mister Malfoy, twenty points to Slytherin for effective tutelage of a hopeless case.”

Upon hearing that, Harry clenched his teeth and Malfoy turned to say something to him, sneering. However, the sound that left his mouth in the next moment was a shriek of pain. While looking at Harry, he had walked right into a Ravenclaw student who was making his way towards the professor's desk carrying a large glass with an angry-looking potion sloshing inside. As Malfoy collided with the other student, the glass impacted with his left side and tipped over. In the resulting cloud of yellow smoke, Harry smelt burnt cloth. Looking at Malfoy, he saw the acidic substance eating away at the sleeves of the other boy's school robes. One more second and it would burn its way through completely and start on the human flesh beneath.

Without thinking or hesitating, Harry grabbed the sleeve and pulled. The contaminated cloth covering Malfoys arm came ripping off and he let it fall to the ground. Then he saw it and his eyes went wide. There, on the inside of Malfoys exposed arm, was the Dark Mark. The sign of Voldemort's Death Eaters. Harry blinked and looked up at Malfoy, who was staring at him with something akin to fear in his usually hateful eyes. Then Malfoy unfroze and pulled off the ruined robe, throwing it over his arm to cover the mark.

Harry felt as though he was not really there, his mind going a million miles per hour, replaying the image of the mark on the Slytherins skin. In a sort of haze, he saw Professor Snape making his way over to where they stood and grabbing hold of Malfoy's shoulder, telling the other students that he was escorting the boy to the hospital wing.

“Potter! *Potter!*”

Harry snapped out of it at the sound of Snape's voice. The professor was looking at him. He had known. And now, so did Harry. Professor Snape leaned closer and hissed in his ear,

“*You tell no one.*”

And then he was gone in a swish of black robes, taking Malfoy with him. To the hospital wing, or maybe not, thought Harry, remembering the *blemish* on Draco Malfoy's arm. The rest of the students picked

up their things and followed, leaving the classroom to go to their next lesson. Harry and Ron said their goodbyes to Hermione and went off together. The conversation during the trek to Trelawney's tower consisted of Ron mumbling about bloody gits of potions masters and equally nauseating Slytherins, namely one Draco Malfoy.

"I mean, Harry, why did you help him? He wouldn't help you ... or any Gryffindor ... and Snape giving points to him ..." Ron grumbled. "Still, did you see the look on his face when that kid hit him with the potion? A moment of beauty that was..." the redhead added in a more cheerful tone.

As the boys walked, Harry nodding in all the right places to contribute to the conversation, he couldn't stop thinking about what he had seen. The Dark Mark, on one of Hogwarts' students. A Slytherin, mind you, but still a student. This meant Voldemort's army was growing, expanding to include everyone sharing his views, regardless of age, or it could mean that the Dark Lord was becoming desperate. Somehow, Harry did not think the last option was likely, remembering the Dark wizard's charisma and the loyalty it inspired in his fanatic followers.

Snape had told him not to tell anyone. Did that mean Dumbledore already knew? Knew that Malfoy was a Death Eater like his father and still let him come to Hogwarts? Or maybe Dumbledore didn't know and Snape wanted him, Harry, to keep the secret. But why would he do that? How could he expect Harry to lie and keep secrets from his friends?

With a start, he realised he was already keeping some secrets from his friends. Harry put that thought out of his mind quickly. But what if Snape wanted him to keep the secret from Dumbledore? Where did his loyalties really lie then, with the Light or with the Dark?

Harry's mind was still reeling with unanswered questions and revelations as he made his way down to the Great Hall with Ron to join Hermione for lunch. Said girl was sitting in her usual place and looked up to greet the boys with a smile as the two took their places next to her. When he was sitting down, Harry felt someone's eyes on the back of his head and looked up to see Draco Malfoy stare right at

him from the Slytherin table with a look of pure hatred tinged with fear. He tensed and turned his back on the other boy abruptly to see Hermione watching him.

“Harry ...” she began.

But he shrugged, motioning her to be quiet and putting a piece of potato in his mouth. She seemed ready to protest the obvious dismissal, but after a moment of looking at the raven-haired boy, she let it pass.

Neither of the two noticed how intensely Ron, who would usually sit down and lose himself in the process of eating, was looking at them, observing the silent byplay of motions, gestures, and unvoiced words. The meal passed in silence.

That evening, after losing a game of wizard’s chess to Ron, Harry climbed up the staircase to the sixth-year boys’ dormitory. It was still early and the room was empty. He laid back on his bed, intent to spend some more time pondering the appearance of the Dark Mark in Hogwarts, its reasons and consequences. Its implications.

“Harry! What are you doing here?”

*Déjà vu.*

Ron plopped down on the bed next to him and said, “I wanted to talk to you.” His tone was grave.

“What about?” Harry sat up to face his friend.

The larger boy’s ears went red and he didn’t seem to be able to look Harry in the eye, instead he stared at his hands no comma when he mumbled: “About Hermione.”

Seeing his best friend’s apparent discomfort, Harry had a pretty good idea of what the upcoming conversation was going to be about. He also knew he really, *really* did not want to have that discussion. Not after what Hermione had told him. Last year – heck, even last month, he would have been bouncing with joy at Ron’s final confession of having feelings for his other best friend, the declaration of love he and

the rest of Gryffindor tower had been waiting for since fourth year. Now, though, he was dreading what it would do to the Trio's friendship. But this was something that obviously couldn't be ignored any longer.

"What about Hermione?" he asked.

Ron was fumbling his way through the confession. "I like her. I – I mean I like her. I really like her. In the girlfriend way. I *like* her."

Harry ran his fingers through his hair, sighing. "No surprise there, Ron. Everyone has known you like her. Since forever, I think."

"So you're not angry? Not mad about ... " the other boy trailed off suddenly and paled as the comprehension of what Harry had said sunk in. "What do you mean everyone knows?"

"Well, it's pretty obvious. The way you always look at her, when she's not watching ..."

Ron was starting to panic. "Does she know? Harry, do you think Hermione knows too?" His voice was rising.

It would have been funny, Harry thought, if there was a happy ending attached to this conversation. He recalled his earlier talk with Hermione and felt he had to answer Ron truthfully.

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure she does."

A light started to shine through the panic on Ron's face and he rounded on Harry: "How can you be so sure she does? Has she talked to you about me? She has, hasn't she?"

It was a statement and not a question. Harry could not lie. Not while looking his best friend in the eye and having a conversation that was going to hurt them all in some way.

"She has," he answered quietly, not wanting to say it.

"Harry," Ron started anxiously, "what did she say?"

The redhead's face was alight with excitement; there were stars dancing in his eyes, Harry thought while he awaited the answer. He seemed so sure now, despite the earlier insecurities, as if it were fate. He seemed so sure of what Harry was going to say and when he would, his contract with destiny would be sealed. From the Golden Trio a golden couple would emerge. All that was needed for Harry to say was that Hermione liked him too.

Harry couldn't do it. He couldn't say the thing that would make his best friend happy. In that moment, he would have traded almost everything in the world to be able to say that Hermione was in love with Ron as well. But he couldn't. He couldn't lie. All he said was,

"I think you should talk to Hermione."

The light in Ron's eyes was fading. "Talk to Hermione," he repeated, looking straight into Harry's eyes. "What would she say to me?" he questioned, "*Harry, what would she say to me?*" his voice was rising in pitch.

"It isn't my place to say!" Harry shouted back, starting to feel scared. It is crumbling, he thought. *No, it's not*, a voice inside him answered, *we've always been alright. We'll be alright now too.*

Ron was shouting too, now. "Why did she talk to you, Harry? Why *would* she talk to you?"

*It's going to be alright*, the voice insisted. *You've had fights since you were eleven. You've been friends since you were eleven; you've been family since you were eleven.*

Ron was shouting.

*We were children, when we were eleven. We told each other everything. We had no secrets. We trusted each other completely.*

Ron was shouting.

"What else did she tell you? She doesn't like me! Does she like *you* then, eh? Harry! DOES SHE LIKE YOU?"

Harry froze. *No. Maybe. I don't know.* He couldn't answer. Not now.

Ron was still shouting.

"Do you like her? You knew I like her!"

There was betrayal in Ron's accusations. The voices in Harry's head were getting louder. *Impossible. No.* He had to answer Ron, had to reason with him, and then ... everything was going to be all right. They, all of them, were going to be alright.

Harry couldn't get a word out.

Ron's voice went quiet. "I trusted you."

No, they weren't alright. They weren't eleven anymore, children anymore. The foundations of the Golden Trio were crumbling. Distrust, jealousy – the feelings were creeping in. And yet, he felt that Ron was overreacting. Harry had not *lied* to him.

His conscience was whispering in his ear: *but you have lied to him about other things. You're lying to him right now.*

*I trusted you.*

Harry didn't know what they were talking about anymore. It wasn't about a girl, it was about everything. The Prophecy, his destiny, his secrets. Everything.

*I trusted you.*

And he couldn't deny his conscience. He looked up with sadness in his emerald-green eyes.

"I know." There was no denial in his voice.

Ron turned his back on him, stalked to his bed and pulled the curtains closed around him. Harry felt he couldn't stay in the room and went down to the common room, where he sat down in the armchair farthest from the fire, swallowed in darkness and shadows. *I trusted you.* He hadn't felt so alone since ... ever.



He was alone. Alone with his destiny.

There was no one to trust. No one who trusted him. He forced back the tears threatening to escape and sat in his chair, watching the world around him go about its business and then retire for the night.

Hermione came up to him once. He told her, "Ron knows now, Hermione," and asked her to leave him alone for a while. She did not question him. She felt it too, the shifting of balance in the trio's relationship. All she said was:

"Ron will be fine, Harry. We'll be fine." Then she left.

She didn't understand. She hadn't seen the surety of fate in Ron's eyes, when he had told Harry he was in love with her. When he, Harry, had had the conversation that was hers to have. When he had had to watch pain replace the love in Ron's eyes.

It was her fault too. Yes, it was *her* fault. Harry couldn't trust Hermione and Ron couldn't trust him. No, it was not going to be alright. They might heal and maybe even forgive, but it was never going to be the same. The innocence was lost. Childhood was gone. Illusions of a perfect friendship had ended.

In that moment, Harry made a pledge to himself. He would fulfil his destiny. And he would do everything to win. And then, someday, he would be free to have the true friendship back. A friendship without secrets. A friendship where trust was given freely.

## **Chapter 4 : The Prophecy**

Harry woke up feeling cold and uncomfortable and wondered where he was. He opened his eyes to discover that he had fallen asleep in the Gryffindor common room, feeling exhausted after the emotionally draining evening. Harry groaned, recalling the conversations of yesterday and his subsequent resolutions.

*It was time to go on.* To begin in earnest; time to win. There was no reason for delays, not anymore. His friendships were gone and he had to get them back. And the only way to get the trust back was not to have any secrets. Unfortunately, the way to do that was to eliminate the reason, eliminate Voldemort. He felt his resolve building up. It wasn't going to be easy, but he would do it. There was nothing left to loose. Harry decided to put into action the plan he had spent the entire summer developing. It was a crazy idea. A frightening one. One he had been delaying for too long now...

Before, there was someone Harry could hurt, someone to lose, and he had put it off, filing the plan in his mind as a possibility, nothing more. Now, he was about to make it real. And Draco Malfoy had given him the means. All he had to do was find out where Snape's true loyalties lay.

Harry was sitting in his usual place at the Gryffindor table when Hermione walked into the Great Hall. She looked at him and smiled, sitting down next to him. Harry felt his heart skip a beat when Ron, who had come in right after Hermione, walked right past them, without even looking at his friends, to where Neville was sitting. *It isn't right*, he thought. Ron should have been sitting here, with him and Hermione. But he wasn't and Hermione was talking to him, interrupting his thoughts.

"Harry," she said, "what do you think, should I talk to him? Explain things ..."

Harry took control of his wandering attention and answered: "Yeah, Hermione, you probably should. I'm just not really sure whether he will talk to you," he added while thinking furiously about how he could get Hermione and Ron to make up. If he had any intention of going through with this plan, he was going to have to push Hermione away

too. He couldn't let himself hurt her by letting her get involved in the crazy scheme. And maybe, just maybe at least Ron and Hermione could be friends, have each other, while he sold his life away. While he followed the destiny he was born for.

"Maybe you should talk to him first," she was saying. "After all, it was just a big misunderstanding, I'm sure Ron will forget it in no time. I'm more concerned, though, about what he might think of me."

Harry tried to relieve her fears. "No, Hermione. You don't understand. It was about *trust* between me and Ron. You, he will forgive because there's nothing really to forgive. I, on the other hand, will be waiting for Ron to come to his senses for a long time."

"Harry, you are his best friend. You will probably be laughing about it by dinnertime," Hermione answered with conviction in her voice.

The green-eyed boy looked at her and said with a sad smile, "He will not forgive me *because* I am his best friend."

Harry saw understanding dawning in her eyes and stood up quickly, not wanting to continue the conversation. Walking out of the Great Hall, he thought about the irony of what he had just done. He had destroyed the possibility of mending the trio's friendship he would have eagerly grabbed just yesterday morning.

But there was no time for regrets, not anymore. He hardened his heart and walked faster, intent on spending the morning's free period flying and thinking.

Harry climbed up to Gryffindor tower and took his broom from its usual place next to his bed. He opened the window of the boys' dormitory and flew through it and off over the castle to forget himself in the moment, roving over the Forbidden Forest. While he was putting his body through the rigorous workout, Harry's mind wandered back to the summer.

x x x

*Harry was sitting in his room in Privet Drive, bored out of his skull, with absolutely nothing to do but think. For a second, he felt*

*tremendously angry with Dumbledore and the rest of the Order, who, while making sure the Dursleys didn't abuse him in any way, had also insisted that Harry stay inside the house at all times. That was why he was sitting in his room in the middle of the day. It was a beautiful summer day; the sound of children laughing and playing trickled through the slightly open window. The Dursleys were busy pretending their young nephew didn't exist and thus had left him completely to his own devices. He did not like it because with nothing else to occupy his mind, all he did was think of Sirius. And revenge ... He had failed his godfather once; he wouldn't do it again. Next time, he would use the other spell, the other Unforgivable ...*

*He did not feel guilty about those thoughts. Bellatrix was a murderer; she deserved it. Besides, he had heard Trelawney's prophecy. The one that said he had to become a killer.*

*What's one more, he said to himself. She deserves it as much as Voldemort. She's as evil as he. Just not as powerful. Harry shook himself, feeling guilty all of a sudden. He shouldn't be thinking that, feeling all this hatred. He should not want to kill anyone. He wasn't like Voldemort.*

*'But you are,' said a voice in his head, 'it is your destiny.'*

*No, protested Harry silently. My destiny is to kill Voldemort, stop his evil, not anybody else.*

*'A killer is a killer,' the voice in his head was getting louder, 'no matter how many you kill.'*

*No. The only person I'll kill is Voldemort, he debated.*

*'If you can.' The voice in his head could not be silenced.*

*I will kill him. I must. Nobody else can.*

*'Would you do anything to kill him? Sacrifice everything?'*

*Yes.*

*'Your sanity? Your soul? Your life?' suggested the voice mercilessly.*

Yes, *thought Harry with conviction*. I'll do anything to see Voldemort defeated. Except ... I will not sacrifice my friends.

'Then you are weak. Your friends are your weakness,' *said the voice*.

NO! *Harry shouted mentally, trying to squash the voice*, I will not give them up. They are my strength, my reason.

'You will not win if you can't let them go. Do it. They'll be happier without you anyway, without your destiny destroying them. *Then* you can do anything. You will have no one to hurt, no one to loose. You can win. You *will* win,' *insisted the voice*.

No, I cannot do it without them, *retorted Harry*. We will always be friends, no matter what happens.

'You will only hurt them,' *said the voice*. 'And you will not win, because you're weaker than he. He doesn't care about anyone.'

No. I am not weak. Ron and Hermione are my strength, *maintained Harry*. Voldemort doesn't have that. He doesn't have someone to fight for. This is my power.

x x x

Back in the present, Harry continued his flight over the Forest. He felt the air move around him as he pushed himself and the broom to its limits. The gathering clouds and the distant sound of thunder made him change direction towards Hogwarts.

He had done it now. He *was* willing to do anything, he had realised. Even to push his friends away. And it had already started. Ron was gone, and he would stay away if Harry had anything to say about it. Soon, he would distance himself from Hermione as well, and then ... then he would be ready. Ready to do the thing he had been planning all summer, all the while telling himself he would never go through with it.

Harry had known he could not really do it. Ron or Hermione, one of them would have noticed what he was up to. They would have noticed and would have asked. And then they would have gotten hurt.

Therefore, he had merely toyed with the idea. Safely, because he knew it was never going to happen. After all, he had nothing better to do when sitting alone in his tiny bedroom. So his time was spent by coming up with ways to rid the world of Voldemort. Most of them involved lots and lots of training and grand wizards' duels or even grander battles.

They also had one more thing in common: he would not come out the winner. There was just no possible way, no training regime hard enough to make his power even remotely comparable to Voldemort's, who was a Dark wizard thrice his age. But there was one plan, an outrageous idea the Slytherin inside Harry had cooked up one lazy summer night. It could work. There was just one little problem: there was no way in hell he was actually going to do it!

Then it hit him.

*Oh - my – God! I am doing it, he realised. I'm actually doing it.*

He was doing it right now.

The crazy Slytherin scheme.

x x x

*Harry was sitting behind his desk in the smallest bedroom at Number Four, Privet Drive, watching the sun go down. His mind was wandering again, thinking about the prophecy, about how it was his fate, his destiny to destroy Voldemort. He tried to think of ways to do it. There really weren't that many options. He couldn't kill him with his wand because the spells would lock. And even if he did hit Voldemort with Avada Kedavra when the Dark wizard somehow did not have a wand trained at him, thus avoiding the brother wand issue, Harry was not sure the spell could really kill Voldemort. The wizard had made himself immune to most magical ways of killing, and it would be terribly stupid of him to overlook the most obvious one. Besides, even on the off chance that Harry could get close enough to an unarmed Lord Voldemort, he wasn't too sure he would want to waste the once in a lifetime possibility on something that could not work.*

*That left him with one more option. A messy one, but one that was the most likely to succeed: he could kill Voldemort the Muggle way. However, that option also came with a catch. How to get close enough to do that? How could he, Harry Potter, Voldemort's most famous enemy, get close enough to hit him where it hurt, so to speak?*

*There was one way. The only way, actually. He could get close if Voldemort thought Harry would never hurt him. If he considered Harry his servant, his follower. A most loyal one at that.*

*It was never going to happen. The Dark Lord was not stupid. He would never believe a miraculous change of heart and mind. He would need a reason. He would need convincing, a test of loyalties.*

*And Harry would not do that. He could not do, what was needed to make Voldemort believe him. He was not Snape. He had a conscience, a soul. He could never play-act being a Death Eater, taking part in killings and torture.*

*It was never going to happen. He was never going to do it. Never.*

x x x

Only now he was doing it. He was actually going to do it. To kill Voldemort. To become a Death Eater. And nobody could ever know. Not Ron, not Hermione, and definitely not Dumbledore. They wouldn't understand. They would not approve. They would try to stop him, try to take away his only option.

His resolve even stronger than before, Harry flew back to Gryffindor tower to return his broom and after that, made his way to the first class of the day, Defence Against the Dark Arts. *How ironic*, he thought as he walked through the hallways, *that now I agree with the Slytherins on wishing that Dumbledore had not cancelled the Dark Arts class upon becoming headmaster of Hogwarts. It would have been quite useful.*

Harry stepped through the classroom door to discover that, apparently, Ron and Hermione had gotten over whatever unresolved issues they had between them while he was out flying and were

sitting behind the trio's usual desk at the front of the classroom. Hermione looked up, saw him and nudged Ron. Then his other friend noticed his entrance as well and with an apologetic smile, gestured towards Harry's empty seat on the other side of Hermione. He was inviting Harry to put aside their fight, to forgive and forget.

It would be easy, thought Harry, to go there and sit down and let everything return to normal. But easy wasn't going to win them the war. Harry put on a perfect mask of indifference and sat down next to some nameless Hufflepuff boy, who looked up at him with surprise that was quickly replaced with awe as he realised who had taken the seat next to him.

Harry dared another glance in the direction of his friends. Ron was scowling at him and even Hermione seemed a little peeved at his cold dismissal. 'Good', the little voice inside him said. And he kept his face a mask.

His friends' attention was diverted as Professor Saims swept into the class and began the lesson.

"Good morning, class. Open your books to page 114, today we will be discussing vampires ..."

Hours later, Harry was the last student to leave the classroom and he walked as slowly as he could, just to make sure he was also the last one to arrive in the Great Hall. Then it would be possible to make his *grand gesture*, as he sarcastically called it.

He opened the doors and started walking towards Gryffindor table. As he was nearing his usual spot where at the moment only Ron and Hermione sat, the latter looked up and asked,

"Harry, what is the matter with you? Why did you do that in Defence?"

Harry didn't pause to answer; he kept walking. Right past her, past Ron. Right up to where the other boys from his year were sitting and then said:

"Hey guys, do you mind if I sit here today?"



Dean looked at him, surprised, but didn't pry, answering only with a brief "Yeah, go ahead."

When the rest of the table came alive with the gossip about the likely, and then a lot less likely, reasons about the rift in the Golden Trio, Harry simply ignored the questions and noise around him, going through the dinner in silence.

Later that evening, after having successfully avoided his friends in the common room, Harry lay behind closed curtains on his large four-poster bed and pondered the possible scenarios of approaching Lord Voldemort.

He already had the means: Draco Malfoy. Now, all he needed was a reason. A reason good enough to make Voldemort believe him, good enough to make Malfoy trust him. Trust Harry enough to introduce him to the Dark Lord.

The best lies are the ones with a grain of truth in them.

*The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies ... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not ... and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives ... the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies ...*

Harry knew the prophecy. *But Voldemort did not.* And he wanted to know. So Harry would tell him the prophecy. His prophecy. And then he would become a Death Eater, a servant of Voldemort. And he would succeed.

Harry ran the words of the 'new' prophecy through his mind, trying to make himself believe in them. This was what would determine his success ... or his failure. The legendary prophecy. Harry fell asleep, the words ringing in his ears:

*The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...*

*Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...*

*And the Dark Lord will mark him as his heir...*

*For together they are invincible and apart, they die...*

*And if either is killed at the hand of another...*

*Neither can live while the other does not...*

*The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...*

*The one whose death shall end all Evil...*

*Will be born as the seventh month dies...*

## **Chapter 5: Defining Loyalties**

Harry walked resolutely through the dark corridors and hallways of Hogwarts towards the library and its Restricted Section. His father's Invisibility Cloak was thrown over his shoulders.

He needed information; he needed books. Something to teach him how to be a Death Eater. It wasn't like he could ask someone to help him or to train him. There was nobody to trust, nobody to put in danger. And he was content with that.

Only it was making life rather difficult for him. Sneaking into the Restricted Section in the middle of the night to steal books about the Dark Arts was not something he wanted to get caught doing. That ... would be difficult to explain. So he made his way as quietly as possible through the rows upon rows of books, looking for something even remotely useful, all the while reminding himself of the reason why he was doing this.

If Harry Potter was going to be a trusted lieutenant of Voldemort, his heir apparent, he had to make sure he could play the role. And that meant the Dark Arts, advanced Dark Arts. He probably should not even use anything beside the Dark Arts. After all, Lord Almighty had to believe his conversion genuine. He was going to make Voldemort *want* to have him as his servant and heir. The old snake was going to have to trust him. There was a big difference between him believing prophecy and his resulting inability to kill Harry without committing suicide, and giving the young man the position of trust Harry needed for the completion of his plan.

Walking through the Restricted Section Harry felt almost paranoid, avoiding every black and silver volume that even remotely reminded him of the large screaming book from his first night time excursion into the library. Still, the pile of books on his arms kept on growing with every passing moment. He had had no idea there were this many books about something so forbidden in Hogwarts.

*'Why are you surprised?'* his by now familiar inner voice was running the commentary. *'The Dark Lord himself went to this school, got his knowledge from here, trained here ... devoured the same books you're holding now. You are following in his footsteps.'*

*I'm not. He was a power hungry murderer.*

*'Aah, but why did he learn the Arts?' retorted the voice. 'He studied them to learn to kill, to kill without consequences. Kill for revenge. To murder for his goals. Why are you here, looking at the books about the Dark Arts?'*

*I'm training to defeat him.*

*'Hmm ... let's see. You are learning to take revenge for your godfather, thus you're learning to kill out of anger. And you are learning to kill. Kill without consequences. You know you'll have to murder innocents. And you know, in the end, if you succeed, no one will hold it against you. You'll be a great hero. You'll have killed for The Cause, your goals will redeem you in the eyes of the world. So, tell me how are you different? Revenge, anger, ambition ... a murderer.'*

Harry stood, holding the books, and walked out of the library, shaking his head.

*No. I do it to keep people safe, people I love. Voldemort kills to destroy and he loves no one.*

But as Harry tried to fall asleep in his bed, after returning from his late night trek, he heard the word *murderer*. *Murderer*, over and over again in his mind.

Harry was sitting in his favourite chair in the Gryffindor House common room, an open book resting in his hands. His eyes were closed, thinking. A couple of weeks had passed from his late night trip to the Restricted Section, a couple of weeks without friends. Time spent learning and training. Every night, after Ron and his other dorm mates had fallen asleep he took the Invisibility Cloak from his trunk and made the journey to the most useful and private room in the castle – the Room of Requirement. At first he had found a replica of the common room, where he could study the forbidden books without anyone looking over his shoulder. As the time advanced and his skills grew the room changed. Little things at first. A few less lights, a few more shadows. The room was evolving with him. Growing darker, more dangerous. Last night, when he had been there all he found

was a single dim light next to his chair in room of shadowed corners and blood red furniture.

He had sunk into the chair in the and opened the book to the last chapter. The Unforgivables. The most forbidden, Darkest curses of the Arts. His learning was reaching its end, he thought, sitting alone in the room. Soon it would be time. Soon.

He opened his eyes to discover Hermione standing right in front of him, blocking his view of the fire. She had an impatient look in her eyes.

“Harry! Harry, are you listening to me?”

He sat up straighter, “Hmm... Hermione, what were you saying?”

“I was just telling you to talk to Ron. This has gone on long enough.” Her face was softening, though.

“I don’t know what you mean, Hermione.” While consciously avoiding her eyes he shifted in the chair trying to make himself more comfortable. Unfortunately, the bushy-haired girl didn’t seem to notice his unease.

“Harry, you’re acting childish. Shutting us both out for something that isn’t even about you,” Hermione huffed.

She went on: “You’re acting like Ron in the fourth year. Holding a grudge. Not willing to let it go.”

“This is between me and Ron. It has absolutely nothing to do with you,” he told her.

She seemed confused. *Damn, of course she thought it was about her.* Harry tried to backtrack:

“It was about me not telling Ron – *lying* to him.”

“But this is silly! You didn’t lie to him about anything. Even Ron sees it now. You’re just being stubborn.

"We miss you Harry, you've been avoiding both of us lately," she didn't give up, crouching lower to be face to face with her long time friend.

Harry acted dismissive. "I was busy. Still am."

"Harry, you have never been too busy for your friends before. What's going on?" A curious and somewhat angry voice continued questioning him.

She was getting too close now. Hermione had always been a bit too smart for her own good. He decided to stall and derail from the topic of interest.

"I guess you've been a good influence on me, Hermione. I've been studying." It wasn't a lie, not really.

"OK, but Harry, talk to Ron. Promise me."

There was no getting around that pleading voice. "I promise, Hermione."

"Soon," she specified.

"Soon," he agreed, watching her retreat to her chair near the fire. She started up a conversation with Ginny and occasionally, one of the girls would glance in his direction. His ears were burning.

Harry wasn't happy. It had been a mistake to make that promise to Hermione. Both of his friends had been trying to make up with him for weeks now. So far, he had succeeded in delaying the eventual confrontation. But with this promise, it would have to happen soon. And then, he would have to look his friends in the eyes and *lie*. Just flat-out lie to them, because there was no way he was going to let them find out what he was doing. He had to keep them at a distance, both for their safety and for his.

That evening, Harry made his way to the Room of Requirement for the finalisation of his studies into the Dark Arts. A final test. He paced three times back and forth in front of the empty wall. A door appeared.

He opened it and walked in. The noise coming from the room was frightening – for the reason of what it implied.

It was the excited chatter of two small monkeys in a cage together. He looked at the little fellows, like two small, hairy and really, really ugly children. This was the completion of his training.

The young man brandished his wand. The room had provided for his needs, he thought as he pointed the wand at one of the creatures and uttered the Unforgivable spell he had used once before in his life.

“*Crucio*,” left his lips.

Nothing happened, the world was still peaceful. There were no cries of pain. It hadn’t worked. He couldn’t do it. He felt frustrated. He also felt relieved.

*'Oh-no. No, Harry, my boy. You're not going to give up so easily. Try again. Come on, try again. Say it.'*

“*Crucio!*”

This time there were screams. This time he had succeeded. His shoulders slumped in relief and in shame. He could do it. Next up: “*Imperio*.” It was by far the easiest of Dark spells, because he didn’t have to hurt anybody with it.

The spell cast, Harry felt the simple, uncomplicated mind of the small creature. For a second envy enveloped him; *so easy, such a peaceful existence*. He felt the mind bow to his will, to his command. A moment later, the monkey was performing a hair-raisingly incompetent rendition of an Irish jig. It was hilarious. He started laughing with tremendous relief, forgetting the real reason why he could enjoy a show like that. It did not last long, though. Harry’s hiccupping, hysterical laughter subsided.

There was a final spell left. Harry collected all the darkness residing in his mind, all the anger, all the hate, all the resentment he felt towards his fate, for at being destined to do this. And he forced it into one spell.

“*Avada Kedavra!*”

A blinding green light engulfed the room. And when it cleared, the dancing monkey was lying there, dead. *It was so easy; killing is so easy.*

Harry felt tears well up inside of him. His eyes turned into a dam, keeping the flood in. It was a lost battle, however, and a moment later, his sobs filled the room. The Boy Who Lived, hero of the wizarding world, knelt in front of the body of a dead animal in mourning. He mourned the loss of a life, the loss of innocence.

*'Boy! Boy, stop it,' the voice was screaming into his mind. 'Stop crying, you weak little child. Do you think Voldemort will appreciate a killer with a conscience? You cannot cry, boy. You can't mourn. So stop it now! And try again. Do it again. Do it!'*

Harry opened his eyes and slowly stood up. The feeling of unreality was consuming. He felt as though he were under-water, or dreaming. Slowly, ever so slowly, he turned around to face the second creature. Then he aimed his wand. The green light flashed again.

This time there were no tears. His face a mask, his heart made of stone, Harry Potter left the Room of Requirement.

He returned to the Gryffindor Tower and his comfortable bed, and lay down to catch a few moments of sleep before another busy day. Harry closed his eyes and ... to his surprise awakened the next morning having slept the night through without a single nightmare.

Harry got up, bathed, and dressed and walked down the spiral staircase. The room below was empty – except for two people sitting on a sofa near the portrait hole. He groaned inwardly as Hermione stood got up and with a nudge, directed Ron towards him. The boy stood up.

“We have to talk, mate,” Ron told Harry.

Hermione had disappeared through the portrait hole by now, leaving the two boys facing each other in the middle of the common room.



Harry motioned for Ron to follow him to a seat near the window. He sat down himself and said:

“Go on then ... say what you want.”

Ron seemed terribly nervous and determined at the same time. He didn't sit down next to Harry. Instead, he stood in front of him, leaning on the nearby table.

He took a deep breath. “I wanted to talk to you about that evening. I wanted to apologise.”

Harry appeared unconcerned, as he had with Hermione. “You don't have to apologise, Ron. There is nothing wrong.”

“Don't do that, Harry. There is obviously *something* wrong – you have barely spoken to Hermione or me for two weeks. You avoid us in lessons and you don't sit with us during dinner. I am sorry, Harry, if that's my fault. I didn't mean to shout at you when you told me about Hermione. I was just angry and disappointed ... and surprised,” Ron paused for a breath. “I do trust you, you're my best friend ... so I am sorry.”

Against his will, Harry felt a smile tugging at his lips. “OK, who are you and what have you done with Ron?”

The redhead smiled in return. “I guess I realised that we all have to grow up sometime, and it is my time. After you left, that night, I had time to think about things ... it took all night, but ... I realised that I was wrong to take my anger out on you, Harry. You and Hermione are both too important to me to risk losing you. No matter what. So ... can you forgive me?”

Harry wanted nothing more in that moment than to forget every single event of the past weeks, every single decision he had made, and start again. Go back to how things were, go back to being a member of the Golden Trio, the silent rulers of Gryffindor House. But time had a funny way of moving on, taking the past with it and changing people in its passing. Harry too had grown up and realised he had been born for a destiny and now, it was his job to make sure that this destiny,

this prophecy was fulfilled. He looked at Ron's outstretched hand and forced himself to ignore it.

"I am sorry, Ron, but ... give me some time," he made himself say.

The proffered hand dropped, as did the small smile on Ron's face, but the boy only nodded. The moment passed. Harry got up from where he was sitting and the two Gryffindors walked out the common room towards the Great Hall, side by side as hundreds of times before. But the easy camaraderie was gone, the ready laughter absent. It was as though two pretenders had taken the place of old friends. When the boys reached the Hall and walked in together, Hermione looked up and smiled. But the cheerful look vanished from her face the instant her friends got close enough to her so that she could notice the blank, guarded expression on Harry's face and Ron's stiff gait. As the boys neared and sat down, she played the role of buffer to Ron on her left and Harry, sitting on her right hand. The talk had obviously not gone well.

Some days later, as Harry was strolling distractedly through a fourth floor hallway, when rounding a corner, he came face to face with Professor Dumbledore. He stopped, startled. Dumbledore paused as well. Then the old wizard in purple robes smiled.

"Ah, Mr Potter. I had a feeling I'd find you wandering around these parts. I wonder if you could spare a few minutes of your time for a talk with your Headmaster?"

Harry was a little panicked. Did Dumbledore suspect something? The old man had shown no interest in him since the beginning of the term in September and by now, the Christmas break was nearing. Having no real choice in the matter, he nodded his consent.

"Excellent," the headmaster's eyes were a twinkling blue behind his half-moon glasses, "Follow me then."

Dumbledore led Harry through some passageways until they came to a stop before the stone gargoyle blocking the entrance to the headmaster's office. Dumbledore said, "Lemon Sherbet," and both he and Harry stepped through the opening onto the upwards spinning staircase. Upon entering the office, Dumbledore went to sit in his

chair behind the large desk and gestured for Harry to take a seat opposite him.

“Harry, I have wanted to talk to you for some time now ... I am sorry I haven’t found the time before, but,” he paused and leaned closer over the table to look straight at Harry, the twinkle in his eyes dying, “I am afraid it cannot be delayed any longer. Professor Snape has brought a certain incident to my attention. I am sure you know I mean the episode in Potions class with young Mr Malfoy. Professor Snape has informed me of the details of the encounter and I must commend you, Harry, for your quick thinking in saving Mr Malfoy’s ... *skin*, let us say. But I understand that in doing so you saw something quite ... unexpected,” Dumbledore trailed off, lifting a questioning eyebrow.

Feeling some relief that his secret was still safe, and somewhat happy for the opportunity to question Dumbledore, Harry continued for him. “You mean the Dark Mark, Professor, on Malfoy’s arm? Yes, I did see that. Snape ...”

“Professor Snape,” Dumbledore interrupted, putting emphasis on the word *Professor*.

“*Professor* Snape told me not to tell anyone about it. I had wondered if even you knew about it, sir. I mean, obviously you do, but I just don’t understand how you could let a Death Eater into Hogwarts. He is a servant of Voldemort; there is no telling what he will do. How could you endanger the Muggle-born students like that? They feel safe in Hogwarts but they’re not – they can’t be with a Death Eater walking around,” he was out of breath, all the thoughts he had had upon seeing the mark bubbling out.

Professor Dumbledore’s eyes were twinkling again. “While I do appreciate your concern for the safety of your fellow students, there never was any great danger. Professor Snape informed me of young Malfoy’s initiation into the Death Eaters’ ranks during the summer right after the event itself. I made the decision to allow Mr Malfoy to return to Hogwarts with the full certainty that if he were given an order to inflict any kind of harm upon other students, Professor Snape would know about it the minute it happened. So would I, and I’d also

be able to prevent anything unfortunate from occurring ... so you see, Harry, there really is nothing to worry about."

Harry couldn't believe this. He butted in with, "Professor, I don't see why you would have him here in the first place. Even without him posing a threat, why would you allow him to continue his education when he is already a Death Eater? It is like perfecting one of Voldemort's weapons for him!"

"Do you remember that Professor Snape was also a Death Eater, Harry, and that he is now a spy for the Order? By giving him a chance, he has the opportunity to redeem himself." Dumbledore sounded very serious now, "Do you see what I mean, Harry?"

*Damn*, Harry thought, *this cannot be happening*. Out loud, though, he said, "You mean ... you mean Malfoy is a *spy* for you? Like Snape?" He held his breath, waiting for the answer.

"A spy? I'm afraid not, Harry, but I do hope that young Mr Malfoy can be returned to the Light side. What I intended by comparing him to Severus Snape was to show you that anybody can be redeemed if they want to. Mr Malfoy is still young and impressionable, and I hope that by keeping him at Hogwarts, by not letting him to spend all his time surrounded by the evil he was raised in, he may rethink his options, his choices ... And Harry, I will not be able to keep him here were it to become known among the students that he is, in fact, a Death Eater. I must insist on the seriousness of this situation, Harry, and ask you to keep it secret from everyone," he smiled, "and please convey my request to Mr Weasley and Miss Granger as well, as I am sure you have by now informed them of your discovery."

Harry squirmed a little under the old wizard's gaze. "Actually, I haven't told anyone, like Snape asked me."

The headmaster appeared startled and not a little concerned by this revelation. "Not even your friends?"

Harry shook his head, feeling uncomfortable as the Professor peered straight into his eyes. Suddenly, the old man said, "I feel I have to apologise to you, Harry ... old habits die hard."

By now, Harry was feeling quite confused. Looking at the white-bearded man, he asked: "Apologise for what, sir?"

Dumbledore got up from his desk and walked over to Harry, taking the chair next to the boy. "I must admit I was quite interested if your silence in the matter had something to do with the small rift in your friendships that I have detected recently ... or whether you had developed a sudden loyalty to Professor Snape," the Headmaster let out a small laugh at that point. "Since logical deduction states the last option as less realistic, I wondered what the reasons behind your disagreement with your friends might be. And for that reason, I must apologise."

"I don't ..." Harry began, his brow furrowed, but was silenced by Dumbledore continuing.

"Occlumency, my dear boy," the man said. Harry's heart missed a beat. He felt his fingernails dig deep into the palms in his hands. The pain was irrelevant, however, as panicked thoughts ruled his mind. *Occlumency? Oh, God.* Did Dumbledore know? How could he have been so stupid? Of course Dumbledore knew! Everything was over. The old man could read his mind.

And so could Voldemort. Voldemort could read his mind. He *would* read his mind the moment he saw Harry. How could he have done something so idiotic? *How could I forget something like that ...* His trail of thought was interrupted by Dumbledore, who didn't seem to have noticed anything was wrong.

"I must apologise for trying to read your mind," the old man was saying, "but I must also congratulate you."

*Congratulate?*

"It seems Voldemort's last attempted to control you at the Department of Mysteries last summer has made your mind immune to outside interference. I was not able to reach any of your thoughts ... and I would say this means that neither can anybody else."

Harry's heart resumed beating normally and his clenched hands relaxed. *Everything is alright.* It was better than alright. He now had a

lot of useful information he did not have before this talk with the headmaster. The smile came naturally to his lips and relief was evident in his voice.

“Really, Professor? Does that mean that Voldemort won’t be able to send me any more visions?”

“It does indeed, Mr Potter.” Dumbledore was smiling as well. Then he stood up and informed Harry it was time to go to the Great Hall for dinner. They left the office and walked together in silence. Professor Dumbledore was sporting his usual little half-smile and Harry was too busy with his thoughts to pursue further conversation.

He now knew for sure that Malfoy was a loyal Death Eater, and that Snape, on the other hand, was on Dumbledore’s side of this war. These facts entailed that for his plan to succeed without interruptions, Harry’s ticket to Voldemort was Draco Malfoy, and that Snape could not discover his apparent conversion to the Dark side.

He planned out the story he would tell Malfoy to get the boy to take him to Voldemort without informing his mentor and Head of House. He also had to figure out a way to convince Voldemort to keep his identity secret from said Head of House. It wouldn’t do for Dumbledore to find out what he was doing and come to the wrong conclusions.

His dinner finished, Harry sat in the Great Hall, discreetly watching the Slytherin table. The moment he saw Draco Malfoy get up, Harry stood and made his way to the doors.

After a moment’s wait, the Slytherin exited the Hall and they were alone in the hallway. Harry stepped up behind the blond boy, startling him.

“Malfoy,” he hissed quietly, “if you don’t want the entire school to know about the little *decoration* on your arm, meet me in the Trophy Room. Tonight at one o’clock.”

Without waiting for an answer, he turned his back on the Slytherin and stalked off.

## **Chapter 6: Point of No Return**

After all this time spent trying to avoid Ron and Hermione, while conducting his private training in the Room of Requirement, sneaking out of the tower in the middle of the night posed no difficulties for Harry. Every single boy in the sixth year boys' dormitory was soundly asleep; at least the occasional snores in the otherwise quiet room seemed to imply that. Thus, it really was far too easy for the dark-haired teenager to creep down to the abandoned common room and then through the portrait hole. Even the Fat Lady guarding the entrance to Gryffindor tower was napping. Though by that time Harry had gotten used to the mysterious splendour of the ancient castle, the special circumstances of this night's quest made his heart pound faster with adrenaline and the beams of moonlight slanting through an occasional window gave Hogwarts a somewhat ominous atmosphere.

Harry reached the large Trophy Room without interruptions. Passing through the stone archway, he entered the room and walked swiftly to the farthest corner settling down to wait under his Cloak. Harry checked his watch; he was early, it was a quarter to one.

Not even a minute after he had pulled down the sleeve of his robes, covering the wristwatch, Harry heard soft footsteps approaching his hiding place. He waited a little longer and then Malfoy entered his line of vision. The blond boy was alone, no henchmen following him around this time. Holding his wand securely in his hand Malfoy made his way deeper into the room. The Slytherins eyes were darting about nervously. He gave a little startled jump as Harry took off his Invisibility Cloak and said, "Malfoy."

The other boy turned toward Harry and nodded his greeting. "Potter."

Both boys were eyeing each other cautiously, Malfoy's wand still in his hand and Harry, minus the wand, looked no less dangerous. The air in the room was thick with tension. The blond boy regained his composure quickly though, and the usual superior sneer appeared on his face as he pocketed his wand. Harry relaxed slightly, the imminent danger of being on the receiving end of some nasty hexes or curses over.

“Well,” came Malfoy’s impatient voice, “what do you want? After all *you* asked me to come here.”

“And you came,” Harry countered quickly.

The Slytherins eyes narrowed. “It’s not like I had any choice in the matter, is it? So, spit it out, Potter, what do you want?”

“I wanted to talk to you, Malfoy.” Harry’s eyebrow rose. “Obviously. Or did you not notice?”

“Stop playing games, Potter!” Malfoy was seething by now, his anger and frustration evident in his tone of voice.

Harry’s lips curled in a mocking imitation of professor Snape. “Now, now, Mr Malfoy, don’t lose your temper. You are acting positively ... *un-Slytherin* ...” he hissed softly. It was obvious he was enjoying himself.

That was it. Malfoy’s already high-strung nerves yielded to the temptation. After all, it really was a rare opportunity, to have Potter all alone, without witnesses. The boy, whose usually cold grey eyes were burning with rage, threw caution to the wind and pulled his wand. However, there was one thing he could not have anticipated – Harry’s recent training. Whatever spell was about to leave his lips never got the chance to be spoken out loud as Harry’s wand moved incredibly swiftly and *Impedimenta* resounded in the dark room.

The taunting smile had left Harry’s face when Malfoy decided to attack him and now it was perfectly serious. He stepped closer to the immobilised boy whose eyes were following his approach.

“Malfoy. Are you quite finished? Can we talk reasonably or shall I leave you in this condition while I speak *at* you?” he asked.

Harry reached the Slytherin and peered into his eyes. They blinked once under his scrutiny. Taking that as a sign of submission Harry released the spell holding Malfoy suspended in front of him. The fair-haired boy crumbled to the floor instantaneously, but instead of getting up, he looked up at Harry noting the other’s solemn demeanour.



Without saying a word, Malfoy pulled himself up to a sitting position on the cold stone floor. Harry watched him for a moment and sat down opposite him. The room was cold and dark, so Harry took out his wand once again.

*“Lumos.”*

A small spark of light appeared on the tip of his wand. It illuminated the two boys sitting face to face in an uneasy truce, but the rest of the Trophy Room was even more cloaked in shadows as the flame made a circle of light in darkness.

Draco was silent, waiting for the other to begin.

Harry took a deep breath and plunged in. “Do you remember that Potions lesson? The one where you got burned.” He stumbled a little but continued, “When I ripped off the sleeve from your robes. You know what I saw, don’t you?”

“Is there any other reason why I would be here?” Malfoy spat. Then his voice turned thoughtful and a calculating gleam appeared in his eyes.

“Potter ... If you saw that ... why haven’t I been expelled? Tell me, Potter, why haven’t you told this to your *precious* Headmaster?”

Then Harry did smile. *The game is on.*

“Malfoy,” he began, “why did you join the Dark Lord?”

If the blond was surprised by this question he didn’t show it. “I joined because He will win and I am going to be on the winning side.”

In the comfortable darkness of the sleeping castle, the entire conversation seemed almost unreal, like a really vivid dream. Perhaps that was the reason for Malfoy’s uncharacteristic openness.

“Why do you want to know?” inquired Malfoy. He really was curious.

*Here we go.*

"Maybe I want to be on the winning side as well."

Malfoy gave a cold, harsh laugh. "You're kidding." He continued laughing, the volume increasing to nearly hysterical.

Harry just sat in his place and looked at him quietly.

Suddenly the Death Eater seemed to notice that Harry wasn't laughing with him. The laughter died as abruptly as it had started.

"You are not kidding," he was incredulous. "You, Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, want to join the Dark Lord? You *are* serious, aren't you?"

At Harry's affirmative nod, his mouth fell open. "*Merlin.*"

After a moment passed, Harry told him, "I want you to take me to Lord Voldemort ..."

"Do not say that name," Malfoy interrupted, hissing.

"I want you to take me to the Dark Lord ... soon. I know you can Apparate me with you because of the Dark Mark. Will you do it?"

The blond considered the question and then in a true Slytherin manner asked, "What do I get out of it?"

"You get to tell the Dark Lord that Harry Potter has abandoned Dumbledore and is joining him. Do you understand how appreciative your lord will be?"

Malfoy smirked in reply. "I see your point."

"Good," Harry said and as an afterthought added almost carelessly, "Oh, and if I were you, I wouldn't tell anyone about my conversion ... you might be sidestepped. And Dumbledore might catch wind of it."

"All right. I will contact you when the time comes." Malfoy ended the conversation by standing up and walking out of the room. Leaving Harry alone in the darkness.

Harry sighed and climbed back to the Gryffindor tower. *It is done.*

A week passed. It grew colder and the castle grounds were covered with a carpet of snow. The Christmas Holidays were nearing. Professor McGonagall posted the list of students who would be staying in the castle during the holidays. Harry was still successful in avoiding Ron and Hermione; neither of the two had decided to stay in Hogwarts, and this year they had not asked Harry to spend Christmas with them, *thankfully*.

When he went to write down his name in the list of students, he discovered with a small amount of surprise that he was the only Gryffindor staying. A bigger surprise was one other name on the list. Right in the beginning stood in a scrawling, elegant script – Draco Malfoy. The boy had never before spent the Holidays in Hogwarts. Harry's anxiousness grew. *Soon*.

The evening after the student population left for home, Harry was sitting in the common room, reading, when he heard the Fat Lady shrieking. Someone was trying to get into the tower. He moved towards the portrait hole and opened it. A second later the red and gold Lions Den had another occupant – a pureblood Slytherin.

Draco looked around and smirked. "How very ... Gryffindor."

Harry maintained his calm, but inside his heart was beating rapidly and he felt sweat begin to form in the palm of his hands.

"Well. What is it?" he asked.

"Tonight. Meet me in the Entrance Hall at ten o'clock. *He* is waiting." With that, Malfoy swept out of the portrait hole in a cloud of robes worthy of his Head of House.

A couple of hours had never before passed so agonisingly slowly. Finally, his watch showed ten minutes to ten. Harry stood up, climbed through the portrait hole and down the stairs to the Entrance Hall. There, by the castle doors, stood Draco Malfoy. The boy was dressed in black robes very similar to classic Death Eater attire. All that was missing was a white mask; Harry guessed that was in his pockets.

Malfoy threw a bundle of clothes at him and stepped out the doors, saying, "Put those on. Quickly. The Lord must not be kept waiting."

Harry joined Draco outside and closed the castle door behind him. There he donned the black robe and mimicking Malfoy pulled the large hood over his head, effectively obscuring his face in shadows.

“Come on. We Apparate from the Forest,” Malfoy told him impatiently.

The two black shapes moved side by side across the white, snow-covered grounds of Hogwarts towards the Forbidden Forest. When the boys reached the old trees Draco came to a stop. Looking at him Harry stood as close by as he dared and when Draco vanished with a quiet pop, Harry was swept along in the disturbance wave of his Apparition.

They reappeared in front of a large gothic manor. Without hesitation, Malfoy pulled him along and the teenagers entered the house. The hall was subtly lit with candles, Harry noticed as he followed his guide through the labyrinth of corridors. They stopped in front of a richly decorated door of dark wood. Malfoy knocked.

A familiar, deep voice answered, “Enter.”

The blond boy pushed the door open and stepped inside, Harry following closely on his heels.

It was a small room, scarcely furnished and its most prominent feature was a large black throne in the middle of the back wall. The throne was occupied by a black shadow with red eyes in a bone-white face.

*No turning back now.*

Simultaneously the teenagers dropped to their knees, almost instinctively uttering, “Greetings, my Lord.”

Silence followed the words. The figures on the floor kept their kneeling posture, unmoving. The large windows of the room were covered with thick dark green curtains, as though to make sure nothing natural or pure from the outside world could interfere with the malignant air of the chamber. The sinister aura of the room was thickest near the throne of its primary inhabitant.

Suddenly the silence was pierced by a bone-chilling cackle emanating from the red-eyed monster.

“Yes, yes. Your Lord. How fascinating to hear you say that, Potter,” Voldemort said quietly. “Young Draco here had informed me of your most fortunate decision. I must admit, however, I am curious as to your reasoning. And the validity of your betrayal of Dumbledore and his little Order.”

The dark wizard motioned impatiently with his hand.

“Get out, Draco! I must have a chat with Mr Potter here.”

Malfoys head snapped up, a look of incredulity on his face.

“But ... My Lord,” he managed to stutter out before Voldemorts eyes narrowed and the dark lord turned his attention completely to the Death Eater.

“But, what? Do not presume to question your lord,” he yelled. “You should have learned your lessons by now!”

Malfoy paled to the point where his complexion could compete with the unnatural ivory white of Voldemort. He started trembling in anticipation of punishment to come.

A soft *Crucio* left the mouth of the wizard. He kept the spell for about a minute, until the screams and later whimpers coming from Malfoy’s lips had turned into hoarse whispers, pleading his lord to stop.

Voldemort moved his wand abruptly, cutting the spell. “Enough! Leave us.”

The wizard on the floor blinked away the drying tears and gathering his wits and strength moved towards the door. As he exited he spared one glance over the shoulder; bright green eyes stared back at him from the spot Harry hadn’t moved from during the show. Closing the door behind him, the blond left Harry alone with the Dark Lord.

Upon hearing the thud of the shutting door lord Voldemort stood up from his black throne and walked slowly to Harry.

“Get up,” he ordered.

Without hesitation or apparent fear the young man stood, his eyes lowered. He wanted to avoid looking at the terrifying vision of evil right in front of him. The dark wizard’s face showed no emotions, but his voice, if possible, seemed tinged with amusement as he gestured for Harry to walk in front of him to a small niche near the curtain-covered windows, saying, “Well, boy. Explain yourself.”

Still avoiding the red eyes Harry replied with, “Explain what? As I told Malfoy, I wanted to join the winning side. Also I was sick of Dumbledore’s manipulations.” He continued a little bit more forcefully, “I do not want to be Dumbledore’s puppet anymore.”

“Indeed. That is most fortunate for me. However in all our encounters I have not detected any inclinations towards the dark side of magic in you.”

In a swift, almost undetectable move, he grabbed Harry’s wand from the pocket of the boy’s robes. Voldemort held it between two fingers, almost toying while looking at the startled boy.

“You must see why I find this conversion to dark slightly unbelievable. Tell me, boy, why should I not have you killed this instant and save myself from all the trouble you may bring me later?”

Taking a deep breath Harry leaned against the dark wood panelling.

“I can give you a reason,” he started in a slightly quavering voice.

“Really?” If Voldemort had had eyebrows, one of them would have risen in question at that point.

Harry knew that it really was life or death, *his* life or death depending on the believability of the explanation he had thought up. To keep his hands from trembling he fingered the velvety green of the curtain beside him while letting the story come out.

“My Lord. I am certain you remember the prophecy that was destroyed in the Department of Mysteries last spring. The prophecy concerning you and me.”

The dark wizard face betrayed no interest in the story, but his breathing was a little faster.

Oblivious to his captive audience Harry continued the performance. “What you don’t know. What I didn’t know at the time was that Dumbledore already knew the prophecy. He had heard it and kept secret from me. It was only by accident that I learned its contents and I’m sure Dumbledore would prefer if I did not know it.”

Voldemort gripped his arm painfully, his skeleton-like fingers digging deep into the flesh. His face came so close to Harry’s that the boy could smell death. He hissed:

“And what exactly did the prophecy say?”

Harry’s lips curved. “The prophecy is the reason I’m here. I am here because I want to live.”

“It is? Do tell me, Potter.”

Unseeing eyes looking straight ahead Harry recited.

*The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...*

*Born to those, who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...*

*And the Dark Lord will mark him as his heir...*

*For together they are invincible and apart, they die...*

*And if either is killed at the hand of another...*

*Neither can live while the other does not...*

*The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...*

*The one whose death shall end the Evil...*

*Will be born as the seventh month dies...*

His voice crumbled and his hand let go of the curtain leaving behind a sweaty impression.

"You see now, don't you? Why Dumbledore never wanted to tell me. Why I am here."

Voldemort took hold of Harry's face, making the boy wince at the uncomfortable touch.

"Is this true?" he asked, peering into the green depths of the boy's eyes. Harry forced himself to believe and it seemed that Voldemort was egoistic enough to find the explanation plausible.

He let Harry go and in an abrupt movement turned around and stalked towards his throne throwing himself into its black comfort. Harry didn't move from his spot near the windows.

Minutes passed as lord Voldemort appeared deep in thought. Then he looked at Harry and said, "My heir ... interesting how that happened. Come, boy, bow to your Lord."

Hesitantly Harry left the relative safety of his little niche and walked closer to the throne, there he dropped to his knees repeating his former greeting with all the emotion he could force into his voice, "My Lord ... I am your servant."

The lipless mouth seemed to smile. "Yes. You are."

Lord Voldemort took out his own wand, adding it to Harry's and toying with both wands said, "Hmm. I wonder if you know how my servants are marked."

The green eyes widened and the boy backed away slightly.

"My Lord, I don't think it would be wise ..."

"Silence!" The enraged shout from the Dark Lord hurt his ears. "Do not presume to tell me anything. I am your chosen lord; you follow my orders. And I know what is best. You have seen how I punish



disobedience and no matter what the prophecy says I will not hesitate to exact that punishment on you.”

In a quiet voice Harry dared to answer, “It is because of the prophecy I interrupted ... do you not remember? *Neither can live while the other does not.* Were Dumbledore to discover this meeting, were he to see a Dark Mark on me all would be lost. All he would have to do in order to destroy *you* is killing me.”

Voldemorts mouth was in a distasteful smile.

“You have made your point,” he spat. “In addition to that I think it would be best to keep your identity secret from my Death Eaters. There is no reason to make it easy for your Headmaster to discover this conversion.”

Harry allowed himself a small smile. “Thank you, my lord.”

Voldemort threw Harry’s wand back to him.

“Yes, yes. Go now, fetch young Malfoy and return to that school of yours. I expect you back in two days for a presentation to my Inner Circle. Go!”

Harry bowed once more and facing the dark wizard backed to the door. After allowing the door to close behind him he looked around to discover Draco Malfoy hovering nearby. He grabbed the blond’s shoulder saying, “Come on. We are ordered to go back to Hogwarts.”

Malfoy started to ask something, but was silenced by the increasing pressure of Harry’s grip. He bit his lip and led Harry through the small maze of corridors, retracing the way they had come. Once outside, the boys Apparated back to the Forbidden Forest.

Harry decided to have a walk and think about things in the dark snowy grounds. So, he asked Malfoy to leave him alone. Before the other boy had time to protest he added:

“The Dark Lord has ordered not to discuss this with anyone. Do you understand? Anyone. Oh, and meet me here in two days. I must see our lord again then.”

Malfoy left for the Slytherin dungeons and soon after so did Harry, upon realising that he was alone in Gryffindor Tower and there was no reason why he should feel uncomfortable contemplating his conversation with Voldemort there.

That night Harry did not sleep well. From one point of view, the hardest part was over. From another, the real difficulties hadn't even begun. He hadn't done anything irreversible yet. But he was sure that before all this was over he would have to do things, terrible things, that his friends could never forgive him for. Let alone understand. In two days, he would have his second audience with Voldemort; he shuddered at the thought. Red eyes and Malfoy's screams haunted his dreams.

The next morning he didn't go down to the Great Hall for Christmas breakfast to avoid questions about the dark circles under his eyes. Instead, he had Dobby bring up some food for him while sorting through the small pile of presents at the foot of his bed. Ripping off the colourful paper of the largest package, he discovered a warm green Weasley sweater and a large box of homemade fudge. Putting a sweet into his mouth, he moved to the next package – a book about advanced defence techniques. The choice of present had Hermione written all over it. The smallest package turned out to be a gold and red friendship bracelet from Ginny. Ron, for once, had taken a leaf out of Hermione's book, sending him a step-by-step guide to the more difficult Quidditch moves, and the twins present exploded upon opening revealing an assortment of Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes.

Harry had a nice day in the common room, reading his new books while working his way through the giant supply of fudge.

The following day, however, passed in a tiptoeing pace as he waited for the appointed time to arrive. At half past nine Harry left the Gryffindor Tower carrying the Death Eater garb Malfoy had given him. He walked straight to the Apparating spot in the Forest, put on the dark robes, pulled the hood over his face and waited for Malfoy to arrive.

At precisely ten o'clock, the Slytherin arrived. Without a word he Apparated them to Voldemort's mansion. Upon arriving, he turned to Harry.

"I do not appreciate being your errand boy," Malfoy hissed.

Harry smiled smugly. "That is not something you should discuss with *me*."

Draco paled, the superior smirk leaving his face. He told Harry to follow and led him through the familiar passageways towards the familiar door leading to the Dark Lords audience chamber. He knocked and entered.

Harry, who until that point had been right at his heels, hesitated for a second. Unconsciously his hands moved to his face to make sure the white mask was firmly in place and the black hood covering his unruly hair had not slipped off. Then he stepped through the beautifully decorated door, straight to a vision of hell.

The room was as he remembered, with little furniture but the black throne. The heavy curtains were still drawn and the lighting was still sparse. What he hadn't seen before was the circle of black-clad, white-masked figures occupying the room. If Voldemort fashioned himself a dark god, ruler of fates, he certainly had made sure his followers were made in his image. All that was missing were the burning red eyes.

Harry stepped closer to the throne, doing his best to ignore the mass of black. He kneeled in a fluid motion.

"Your servant, my lord."

In a ceremonial voice, Voldemort replied, "Stand, my boy, and face my Inner Circle."

Harry did as ordered and turned to look at the gathered Death Eaters. He thought the nearest to the door might be Draco Malfoy, but he had no clues to the identity of the others. The robes and masks hid them effectively enough that even though he knew one of the figures must be the elder Malfoy, one his grim Potions Professor and perhaps

somewhere hidden among the others, the cowardly traitor Wormtail, he could not distinguish one from the other. That gave him courage to believe his identity was an equal, if not greater mystery, to the gathering.

Voldemort continued with his speech.

“The most loyal of my followers. I have called you here to welcome into this circle another Death Eater. My heir.”

The Death Eaters were disciplined enough to not voice any protests or questions, but the shifting of feet and the quiet mumblings were still, barely audible.

“*Silence!* This is not your place to question. I have made my decision and I have my own reasons. You *will* treat this young man as my heir. You will protect him; look after him. I want *nothing* happening to him.”

A reluctant acceptance greeted the declaration. The masked figures were eyeing the boy in front of them curiously. At least their postures seemed intrigued, as the faces remained hidden.

“Now. It is time for the initiation. Bring in the entertainment!” Voldemort’s deep otherworldly voice echoed in the room.

Harry felt queasiness settle in his stomach as he stood, maintaining his rigid posture at the foot of the dark throne. *Oh God.* He looked on as two Death Eaters dragged a young Muggle woman into the chamber. They shoved her hard and she landed in a heap in front of Voldemort’s feet. And Harry’s. She had red hair. Harry felt his hate for Voldemort rising to intolerable levels, but forced himself to suppress it.

The dark wizard was speaking, telling him to show all those gathered how to do it. How to torture like the Dark Lord’s heir. Harry channelled the immense hatred he felt for the wizard sitting behind him and pointed his wand at the trembling woman.

“No ... please no ... don’t ...” she was whimpering, tears making the words almost incomprehensible.

But Harry heard the pleas and ignored them, still pointing his wand in a sure hand. *Come on. You can do this. You have done it.*

He managed to hold the Cruciatus curse on his mother's look-alike for three full minutes. Voldemort was laughing, pleased. The Death Eaters were cheering him on, pleased. The Circle was enjoying a show.

After the screaming stopped and the vacant expression took over the woman's eyes Voldemort instructed him to –

“Finish it, my heir.”

This was the easy part. Something to relieve her from all the suffering.

“*Avada Kedavra.*”

Harry had said the words quietly, but that didn't lessen the power behind it. The Wizarding World's hero's first Killing curse at a human being was powered by unbelievable hatred, deep remorse and above all refusal to fail.

The redhead lay dead at his feet as the unmarked Death Eater was welcomed into the circle of the most loyal, most fanatical followers of the Dark Arts.

Later, as Harry was leaving the gathering, Voldemort pulled him aside to inform him that Draco, being the only Death Eater to know his identity, would bring him to other meetings. On the way back, Harry did his best to ignore Malfoys congratulations for his new position in the world. The mutual dislike they both had had since age eleven seemed to have disappeared on the Slytherins side.

That proved to Harry the shallowness of the other boy; switching directions like a vane to where the wind was blowing from. He fervently hoped Malfoy was a good actor, so he didn't have to explain this new hero worship to the school.

Thankfully, Lord Voldemort didn't call any new meetings during the rest of the Christmas Holidays, giving Harry time to get over the

nightmares he had had about his first killing. It gave him time to face his friends as his usual self, not the murderer he had become.

The Sunday Hermione, Ron and the rest of his housemates returned from their break found him sitting in his usual chair, reading by the firelight. He looked up when they climbed through the portrait hole, smiled and thanked them for the wonderful presents he had received.

Life was back to normal.

## **Chapter 7: Deceptions**

The strange reality of Harry's life continued all throughout January. Every day he went to his lessons, a couple of times a week he walked down to the Quidditch Pitch with Ron and Ginny, and in the evenings he sat in the common room, doing his homework assignments like every other sixteen-year-old schoolboy.

Sometimes he ran across Malfoy on his way to breakfast, and the boy would demonstrate an uncharacteristic clumsiness by tripping near the Gryffindor table. These were the days his friends noticed an unusual quiet about him all day; they never made the connection to Malfoy, but on these days and more often than not on the following ones as well, Harry made sure to distance himself from all his old friends. Those were the days Malfoy met him at ten o'clock in the Forbidden Forest. The unmarked Death Eater's number of killings had gone up to five. Almost every meeting he had attended ended in a death by his hands.

All his friends felt the subtle change in Harry; none of them could guess the reason. With every passing day, Harry felt more and more like two totally different persons. One was the cruel heir of Voldemort, the torturer and killer. The other was Harry, a person unlike any of his friends had ever known. Carrying all the burdens of the soulless heir that ruled his nights, the daytime Harry was a quiet, shy boy who did his best to keep from being noticed. He barely talked to people anymore, only speaking when asked a direct question.

He looked grumpier than ever. The school robes he wore daily were rumpled, his hair looked as if it had never seen or heard of a comb and his complexion was paler than usual with dark splotches under his eyes. It seemed to be a struggle for him to get through the day without falling asleep in one of his classes. Still, he never answered the worried inquiries of his friends and professors. After a while, they left him alone.

In the beginning of February, Harry was walking through the Great Hall doors for breakfast when a blond Slytherin bumped into him with enough force to send him tumbling towards the Gryffindor table, nearly landing headfirst in a bowl of porridge.

“Watch it, Malfoy!” Harry snarled trying to get up from his uncomfortable position halfway on the table.

The Slytherin smirked back, clearly pleased with the embarrassment he had caused the Boy Who Lived and headed for his own table without comment.

Harry swatted away the helpful hands of fellow Gryffindors and settled in for a long day. However, by the time evening arrived, the day seemed an extraordinarily short one as the time to meet Draco in the Forbidden Forest neared with unprecedented speed.

Alone in his dormitory, Harry dug out the black cloak and silver-white mask, hidden deep in the bottom of his trunk and further obscured with notice-me-not spells. He cast an incineration spell on the note Malfoy had dropped on his desk in Transfiguration, watching the magical flames destroy the slip of parchment with a single sentence – *Seven o’clock tonight.*

Tucking the bundle of cloth under his arms, almost entirely hidden under his open school robes, Harry climbed down the stairs to the common room. It was the first time Voldemort had summoned him this early in the evening and instead of having to sneak out of a room full of sleeping boys he had to pass through a room filled with students enjoying their time of rest and relaxation after a long day.

As he purposefully strolled across the common room, he heard someone call after him, “Where are you going, Harry?”

Looking around the room, he saw Ginny and Ron staring back at him from behind a table covered with their chess set. Harry shrugged and heading for the portrait hole threw over his shoulder, “I feel like taking a walk around the lake.”

Ginny gave him a small smile asking, “Do you want company?”

“Not really. I want to do some thinking.”

He was almost in the corridor and the portrait swinging shut behind him when he heard her call out, “Don’t stay out too late.”



"I wish," he muttered to himself while walking down to the Entrance Hall and then to the Forest. Nearing the spot where Draco was waiting for him, he wondered silently why he was being called at such an early hour. Voldemort should know better than to endanger Harry's position of trust he held at Hogwarts. He didn't bother to voice the question to Draco, knowing that the young Death Eater was probably in the dark as much as he. Dreading what was about to happen in Voldemort's mansion, he felt the Apparition wave take him to the Dark Mark's creator.

Once again, they were standing in front of the large gothic manor. The cloudy weather and misty air made it stand out like a dark ghost between the shadowy leafless trees. He knew the mansion was occupied, but not a single light shined through the arched windows. Instead, they looked like gaping holes, blind eyes of a monster in the stone walls.

Leaving Draco to follow him at his own pace Harry strode resolutely to the entrance and then taking the path he had walked too many times before to Voldemort's throne room, through corridors dimly lit by scattered, smoky torches set in iron sconces on the walls. He was the image of a strong, powerful and confident Death Eater. The heir of the Dark Lord stepped inside the large hall, pausing for a second at the doors to take in the picture before him. The enormous hall was filled with men in dark cloaks and white masks. Never before had he seen so many of Voldemort's followers in a room, together. His army was vast, bigger than even in Harry's wildest nightmares.

The ruler of this gathered army was sitting in his graceful ebony throne, hands resting at the sides. He was studying the mass of robed figures before him with mild amusement. Voldemort's interest in his surroundings increased as he spotted Harry and Draco hovering in the doorway, his mouth formed into a small, cruel smile. Lifting a graceful pale hand in synch with the smirk, he gestured for the youngest Death Eaters to take their place in his Inner Circle.

The half-circle formed around Voldemort's throne was the other familiar thing to Harry. Since his first introduction to the Dark Lord's most loyal and trusted servants, he had stood in this circle, in this room several times. The large hall was Voldemort's favourite torture

chamber; it had enough space for every imaginable type of painful instrument or device, scattered about the walls and littering the magnificent marble floor. After the initial torture session in Voldemort's private audience chamber, Harry had quickly realised that the Dark Lord much preferred the imposing hall for the evening's entertainment. Perhaps he considered the private chamber too intimate. Perhaps the throne room was more frightening to all the victims.

Harry remembered one of the first young Muggles he had seen brought into the grand hall. It had been a young boy, barely ten in his estimate. He remembered standing in the circle around the dark throne in a room of bottomless black when the large doors had swung open to reveal two of his companions dragging in the young child. He remembered the eyes, glazed over with fear staring right into his soul.

Sometimes he woke up of nightmares, even now, in which he was the boy stepping forward onto an altar of death. He imagined what it would be like to be woken up on a dark night by dark figures, then travelling in an eye blink, as though by magic, to the dark castle. In his dreams, Harry could see through the boy's eyes; carried, dragged through dim passages. He could feel being pushed into the hall, a black nothing. He could hear the doors slamming shut behind him, leaving him all alone. He stood in one place, terrified to move; his lips formed words, the fear making his voice tremble and catch when he tried to call for help. The room swallowed every sound he made, except ... when he finally moved the steps on a slippery marble floor echoed forever, intensifying the sound of his heartbeat in his ears.

Suddenly torches flared into life and he stopped, looking, hoping. His breath caught in his throat and his heart almost stopped at the picture before him. In the flickering flames and shadows they stood ... apparitions in black, demons with white, inhuman faces. As the torchlight made the floor glitter with moving and vanishing sparkles of light the torture began.

Voldemort had always had a flare for dramatics. So it was that what gave Harry the nightmares; never the pain, but the expectation.

Snapping back to the present Harry saw that Voldemort was about to speak. Straightening his back Harry looked around the familiar circle, all standing expectant and then beyond, to the army of Death Eaters filling the hall.

Voldemort opened his mouth. "Welcome, my children, to our dark revel."

Harry's eyes widened with realisation under his mask and all of a sudden, he felt very afraid and very out of place. He had read about these Death Eater gatherings, their celebrations, where blood flowed free and the screams of their victims provided the entertainment. So far, he had succeeded in avoiding any situations in which he would have to enjoy the torture he was inflicting. In the relative intimacy of the Inner Circle, he had just done his part, hurting and killing when it was his turn. It had never given him any pleasure. He had only done what was expected from the man he played. This was different; this was a *party*.

"Bring in the entertainment!" the Dark Lord ordered and the doors opened.

Rows of figures were forced in, man after man, women, children, Muggles, Mudbloods – people. The masses of Death Eaters were rippling as they moved out of formation to grab hold of a personal *guest*. The Inner Circle was disintegrating around him when the more important Death Eaters went in search of their own prey, looking for someone worthy of their attention.

Only Voldemort himself remained in his throne, ruling over the scene before him. The breath of amusement remained on his face as the Dark Lord watched his children play.

Catching his eye Harry felt the compulsion to move closer. He walked in cautious steps to Voldemort, kneeling at the lord's feet. A hand touched his cheek gently, almost caressing him as he was forced to look up into the burning red eyes.

"My boy," the deep voice lingered on the phrase and continued. "I want you to enjoy yourself ... do not stand here, observing. Go out among my servants ... learn, my child. This is for you."

Harry felt shivers down his spine as the statement set in. *For him.* All those people, dying because of him. *Oh God. What am I doing here? What have I done?* At the same time, the beautiful ruby eyes reached something deep in his soul, a longing, ancient as time.

*My child ... for you.* Harry felt himself smile against his will. A gift to him from his lord. Such a grand gesture for him, to please *him*. He forgot all his schemes, all the plans, his reason for being with this dark wizard. He was happy, he was grateful ...

"Thank you, Master," he whispered, for the first time not lying.

Feeling the hand leave his face Harry stood up, still smiling under the mask and joined the Death Eaters having fun in the great hall. Moving through the throbbing black assemblage, he looked for someone to practise on.

The rush of acceptance and gratitude diminished when he spotted a boy about his own age. The other Death eaters had left him alone, obviously considering the obese boy not worthy of their time or effort. As he neared the sobbing mass of lard his light-headedness returned, realising that it wasn't really young Dudley Dursley, but a boy who bore a striking resemblance to his cousin.

He hadn't been sure whether he could actually hurt his relative, but this fellow was *perfect*. He looked so much like Dudley to fuel the anger in his soul and yet he was a complete stranger easing away any inhibitions Harry would have felt torturing a member of his family.

This boy would make it possible for him to please his lord. *His lord*, he thought with a sudden lurch in his heart, dismissing the whispers begging him to return to reality and wake up.

Closing in on the Muggle boy, he took out his wand. The emerald eyes shining in the holes of his mask were delirious with *something*. With a simple spell the end of his wand turned into a sharp blade.

The boy on the ground stopped his whimpering, focusing on the knife, hypnotised by the nearing promise of pain. Harry sat down on the floor next to the Muggle and with an air of calm reached over taking

the boy's hand in his own. The boy's attention left the knife at this reassuring gesture and the quiet pleas resumed.

Such a simple motion it was; a gentle movement of the magical blade; a fingertip falling to the ground. A yelp of surprise emitted from the victim, who was too shocked to feel anything yet. He did scream, however, when the next finger fell. And the next.

Letting the mutilated hand fall to the ground Harry moved on, his gaze wandering, deciding what to do next. A sudden twitch brought his attention to the boy's face. Without knowing why Harry let the knife travel to the boy's forehead and watched the blood from the zigzag wound flow down his cheeks. Oh, how loud the Muggle screamed. The Death Eater laughed, giddy with power, intoxicated by it.

Suddenly Harry felt a hand on his shoulder; he jumped up while whirling around to face his interrupter. It was Draco. With the recognition of a familiar figure came reality. The madness receded from his brain and realisation of his deeds hit him hard. Harry changed back his wand, preparing to cast the Killing Curse on his victim.

Before Harry had time to voice the spell, Draco had produced an ornate dirk from somewhere inside his voluminous robes and ran it swiftly across the Muggles throat. He cleaned its blade on the jeans of the dead boy and standing up told Harry, "Come on. It is too late already; we must get back to the school."

Harry could only nod in response and together they made the return journey to Hogwarts.

Nearing the dungeon stairs, Draco looked at Harry and smiled with perverse pleasure.

"Today was fun, wasn't it?" he said, and disappeared down into the dungeons.

That made Harry stop. *Fun*, he thought, the sudden weakening of his knees making him grab the wall just to hold himself up. When his

breathing returned to normal he resumed his journey up to the Gryffindor tower.

Harry crept into the common room, silently moving through it. The screams he had inflicted were still echoing in his ears. He was midway between the portrait hole and the boys' staircase when he was interrupted.

"Harry."

He flinched, hearing the familiar voice behind him. Slowly turning around, he saw Hermione lounging on a couch near the glowing logs of the dying fire. He stood his ground, arms folded across his chest. Tiredly he asked, "What?"

Hermione yawned and, sitting up straighter, shook off the plaid, covering her from the waist down. Looking at him, she noticed his dishevelled appearance and the carefully controlled timbre of his voice. Noticed it and decided to ignore it for a more immediate concern.

"Where have you been, Harry? It's long after curfew," the Gryffindor prefect asked. "I should report you to Professor McGonagall."

"It's none of your business, Hermione. If you weren't such a teacher's pet you would not be here monitoring everything I do," he snapped.

Hermione seemed abashed. "I was worried about you. Still am."

"Why?" Harry looked at her, with no emotions showing on his carefully composed face. "There is nothing wrong."

"Nothing wrong? You go sneaking around at all hours. Don't come back before dawn, all grimy and smelly. It's obvious you have been out all night. Outside. Doing god knows what." Hermione had stood up from the couch somewhere in the middle of her rant and was shaking with indignation now.

"So? It's nothing I haven't done before. With you, I might add."

Hermione's eyes were flashing. "But you were doing it with *us*. Me and Ron. No you go about it all alone. You don't talk to anyone."

"That's it, isn't it? You're jealous! I don't have time for you anymore and now you want to get me into trouble with McGonagall. I don't spend my evenings with you anymore, so I shouldn't spend them with anyone else? What do you want Hermione? That instead of doing what I want, without you, I spend my time in detentions with Filch?" He turned his back on her to leave the room. Looking over his shoulder he added with barely concealed anger, "Go on then, report me to McGonagall. See if I care."

In the silence following his declaration, Harry heard Hermione sniff suddenly and a hand grabbed him by the elbow. He felt Hermione step closer, her body nearly touching his.

"Harry, wait. I'm sorry," she whispered softly.

He stopped, standing completely still and listening.

"I – I was not waiting here to get you in trouble," she stumbled on. "I just wanted to talk to you. Talk to my friend Harry. My friend whom I miss very much. I worry, Harry. Do you know how you have been acting lately? You are so quiet, almost scared to be noticed sometimes. You are so cold. I feel as though I don't you anymore."

She pulled the boy away from the stairs, towards the couch she had been laying on before. Not letting go of his arm, she forced Harry down next to her. He was still oddly unresponsive as Hermione went on,

"Harry, talk to me. Let me be your friend again. Tell me what's happening to you."

"Nothing. Nothing to do with you," he mumbled under his breath.

Hermione didn't seem to hear him going on with her speech. "Are you acting this way because of Sirius? Do you still blame yourself? You didn't kill him. It's not your fault."

That got Harry's attention. Ripping his arm from her grip he shouted into her face, "This is NOT about SIRIUS!"

As Hermione jumped back a little, startled, he said it again forcefully as if trying to convince himself that what he was saying was true, "Nothing to do with Sirius." When speaking the last word his voice crackled and his shoulders started shaking. *He was a killer.*

Hermione leaned closer, putting her arms around the grieving boy. She collected him in a fierce hug, letting Harry find relief in her warm embrace.

"Shh..." she whispered into his soft hair. "I'm here, it is going to be all right. I will always be here for you."

A crying whimper near her chest – "Don't let go Hermione."

"I won't Harry." She fell quiet, still holding on to him.

Moved by the need to touch him, to bridge the barrier of silence, she traced the curve of his jaw with a feather-light finger and lost in his scent and the closeness of his body she whispered softly, almost unconsciously, "I love you."

A pin drop could have been heard in the deafening silence that followed. Hermione felt the boy freeze, his shoulders tensing as the watery green eyes looked up at her so incredibly happy.

Encouraged she repeated, this time looking at him, "I love you, Harry."

She watched the emotion vanish from Harry's face, as it closed up again. "No"

"But I do," Hermione protested, "I can't help it." She couldn't take back the confession anymore, even if she had wanted to.

"You will be in danger, Hermione. The Dark Lord will come after you ... I can't protect you." *I don't deserve you.*



She was angry now, the uncontrollable mane of brown hair flowing around a face tinged with pink. "I don't need you to protect me. I only need you to love me."

"I cannot." He left the couch to put some distance between himself and the furious, disappointed young woman.

"You cannot?" she echoed, "*Don't* you love me?"

"I said I can't," he told Hermione. "You have no idea what Voldemort would do if he found out I was involved with you."

Fury was still lighting her brown eyes. "I am already *involved* with you! I am your friend."

"So you are already in danger! Do you want me to put you into even more? Do you want to be killed?" he shouted back.

He continued, "Voldemort hunts down, tortures and kills your kind."

The words had barely left his mouth, when Hermione looking at him in disbelief questioned, "*Your kind?*"

"Mudbloods," he hissed the insulting expression.

Hermione collapsed on the couch, sobbing. Tears glistened on her red cheeks.

Harry left her there, retreating to the boys staircase. Having made his way almost to the dormitory door he heard a determined feminine voice call after him, "I am *not* giving up on you Harry Potter."

Once safely inside he took off the dirty Death Eater robes and fell onto the four-poster bed exhausted. Before succumbing to a restless sleep he whispered to the closed bed curtains, "I love you too, Hermione."

The morning dawned bright and sunny, annoyingly contrasting Harry's mood. He climbed out of bed and struggling to put on his jumper walked down to the common room. Doubting that he could hold down any food Harry decided to forego breakfast and sat in his

chair planning to do some extra studying. He felt that with all the sleepless nights he was starting to fall behind on his homework.

That idea was shot to hell as Hermione jumped into the armchair next to him. Tucking her feet under herself she settled in comfortably. Harry shifted in his chair, trying to decide if he still had time to make his escape. No such luck, just as he had started to get up Hermione turned towards him, with a light smile on her face.

“Morning, Harry. Did you sleep well?”

Harry was confused because she was acting like the night before had never happened. Shaking himself out of the momentary stupor he replied with, “Morning,” hoping that the one worded answer would discourage her from further conversation.

Instead, Hermione leaned over the side of her chair, getting uncomfortably close to him. Brushing an imaginary speck of dust away from his shoulder, she continued softly, “Miss me?”

Harry’s face turned red enough to honour any Weasley as he tried to disappear deeper into the armchair. He could not understand why Hermione was acting so out of character and he had no idea what to do or say around this new girl.

Smiling at his apparent unease, she brushed her lips to his cheek, before getting up. Calmly walking out of the still empty common room, she left behind a completely dumbfounded teenage boy.

The truth was, Harry grudgingly had to admit to himself, he had missed her. Not just the girl who just last night had told him that she loved him, but also his best friend. With everything that had been going on in his life lately, all the secrets he had to keep, he abandoned all his former friends.

Harry was still sure he had made the right decision by keeping them, *her* away from him, but now some small part of him was starting to regret it. He wished there were a way to compromise; he could have his friends when he wanted them and at the same time, they would leave him alone when needed. His hand balled into a fist. *Selfish, I’m*

*too selfish.* In frustration, he hit the sides of his chair with a loud, satisfying thump.

Yet ... maybe there was a way to protect them all. Harry didn't understand why he had not thought of it before.

*'Because you have been too wrapped up in your own life, your own problems. Don't you remember? The only condition you put on your actions was that your friends must be safe. Perhaps you have been having too much fun lately?'*

There it was. The annoying little voice inside his head again. And this time ... could it be right? Harry shook his head, *NO*, denying the possibility. He allowed himself a minute to calm down.

It was a very determined young man, who left the Gryffindor tower some time later in search of a certain Slytherin.

Harry made his way through the castle, occasionally checking the Marauders Map to make sure his target hadn't moved. Thanking his luck that the beautiful weekend day ensured most of the students were outside walking around the lake or just strolling on the vast Hogwarts' grounds Harry neared the unused classroom next to History of Magic.

With a last glance at the map, this time to make sure nobody was nearby, he folded it and put it in his pocket. The map and his father's Invisibility Cloak were one of the things Malfoy couldn't find out about.

It was a shame really, the cloak would make it much easier for him to go about the castle, when travelling to his meetings with Voldemort. Shaking off the thought Harry reached out and opened the classroom door. Like he had expected Malfoy was inside. The boy was sitting cross-legged on the teacher's desk, absentmindedly munching on a pastry while concentrating on a book in his lap. He was so interested in whatever he was reading that he didn't even notice Harry entering the room.

Only when Harry let the door fall closed behind him with a small bang did he look up. Seeing that he was alone with Harry an attentive look appeared on his face and he put away the book. Arranging the robes

around him into a more respectable appearance, he asked Harry to take a chair and sit down.

Still standing near the closed door Harry declined the invitation, stating that he had only stopped by to ask him something.

“What can I do for you then?” Malfoy asked in a sickeningly sweet tone.

Harry wasn't sure what was worse. A hateful Malfoy or one aiming to please. No wait, at least he had respected the enemy.

“Meet me in the usual place at nine. I want to see our lord.”

After the brief order, Harry swept out of the classroom not allowing Draco time to respond.

Some time after nine o'clock, Harry stood behind the ornate door of Voldemorts' audience chamber. Telling Draco to stay outside he knocked, a brief rhythmic tap against the hard wood. The familiar voice asked him to enter.

Closing the door behind him Harry saw Voldemort standing close to a window, looking out onto the haunting landscape around the mansion. A hesitation; then Harry walked up to the dark wizard and came to a stop beside him.

Both powerful wizards remained there for a while, in silence. One was putting off a conversation, the other waiting.

The silence was broken when at last Voldemort spoke, “My boy, back so soon? I had not hoped to see you for some days at least.”

“I wanted to see you my lord.” Harry's eyes were still locked on something in the distance. “I needed to talk to you,” he added, eyes flickering to his master.

It was a terrifying sight to behold, a creature of darkness trying to smile with pure joy.

To Harry it was oddly comforting and he felt himself relax, a responding smile coming to his lips.

There they stood ... two dark figures with identical expressions. A quest for immortality fulfilled in a trusted heir, a loving boy with a desperate need to be wanted, to be loved. The twisted bonds born out of death and destiny wove their web around the two wizards, bringing them closer together than even fate had intended. To kill a father is to become one and the want for family makes one look in the strangest of places.

Not wanting to break something, dreading to lose this moment the young wizard didn't speak again for a long time. He was afraid of the happiness he felt in the Dark Lord's presence ... suddenly he realised his mission was hopelessly lost. He could never betray someone that cared about him, someone who had time for him. A lord, who let him do whatever he wanted, let him be himself.

*No, this is not real ... a game ... nothing but a game. I'm pretending. I am. This is not me.*

Yet ...

The Dark Arts, the secrecy, the lies, the deaths – he himself had corrupted his soul enough for this. He couldn't feel guilty anymore. After everything he had done, there wasn't room for guilt. He was someone else now; the Harry Potter of the past was the pretender now. The Dark Lord's heir, killer because of choice not for destiny, was an actor. *He* was the one who was real and *he* played the part of a Hogwarts schoolboy, a young hero.

Feeling himself start to tremble, Harry took a calming breath. The boy, who had travelled into the presence of his predestined enemy did not exist any longer. Funny, how a moment can change history. How make-believe can become reality.

The question he had come to ask, the favour to beg was irrelevant.

Harry didn't need the Dark Lord's protection or his help. He had it. He was Voldemorts' heir and no one would dare to defy him. He *could* be happy.

And now ... he was ready.

Harry spoke.

“It is time my lord. I will do it.”

There was so much conviction in his voice.

## **Chapter 8: Marks of Destiny**

“I will do it.”

The words echoed in the small chamber, making Harry hear them over and over again. With every repetition of the phrase his decision became firmer. Yes, he would do it, could do it now.

Harry had accepted his destiny, had embraced it and was ready for its finalisation.

Voldemort breathed slowly in and laughed. A deep and delighted laugh that filled the room with its sound.

He stopped.

“And what has changed now, my boy?” Voldemort moved to his throne, sitting down on his seat of power. “Are you willing to risk our lives or have you perhaps decided to leave Dumbledore’s school?”

Harry flinched. His decision was made and he had to go through with it right that moment. He knew it was right and he didn’t want to give himself time to have second thoughts, time to regret or hesitate.

He was going to be honest. Not about everything, but honest about his reason for refusing the mark when Voldemort first had offered it to him.

“My lord,” he began, “I know the reasons I gave you before and they haven’t changed, but I did have another reason for refusing,”

“Do tell.” The tone of voice was patronising, but not angry. It was as though the Dark Lord knew what he was thinking, what he was about to say.

Harry didn’t dare to keep his gaze on Voldemort at that point. He launched into the explanation.

“My lord, when I first came to you I was sure that I’m doing the right thing. I knew it was the only way to keep us alive, both of us. But ... I knew that in my head not in my heart.”

Harry glanced at Voldemort, judging his reaction. There wasn't any: the inhuman face was an emotionless mask.

He went on, "I was not sure I could accept your sign, I was afraid of what would happen if the mark didn't appear on my skin," a quieter mumble, "my lord. I was not sure I was loyal to you, that I could promise never to betray you ..." His voice died.

"And you are now?"

"Yes."

After the simple answer Harry felt tremendous relief. This was the turning point of his life. From now on he would do what he wanted. Never again would he have to be a puppet, manipulated and controlled. He had taken the reigns of his destiny into his own hands.

Louder, surer he repeated, "Yes."

"Good." The Dark Lord smiled looking at his lost child, the prodigal son returning home.

"And the other reasons you pointed out ... I take it they don't apply anymore?"

"No," Harry stumbled, "I – I meant yes, my lord, they are not relevant anymore. I *can* hide the mark if necessary. If Malfoy has, then so can I."

"Oh yes, young Draco," the older wizard sneered, "He did not do a very good job, as you did see the mark on his arm."

"An unfortunate accident only, my lord."

"Hmm." Voldemort sat back. "I trust that you can avoid an *accident* like that."

"Of course," Harry assured his master.

The entire situation was strange, surreal. If someone had told Harry even this morning that he would be trying to convince Lord Voldemort



to give him the Dark Mark and that he actually had to argue the issue he would have flooded St. Mungo's and had that person admitted into the psychiatric ward. Oh, and please throw away the key.

He had good reasons, however. Not the least being that he *could* take the mark. This wasn't a game, it was war and he had chosen a side. And he would stand by his decision. Harry wasn't afraid of allegiances ... he was safe and most importantly, accepted at Voldemorts' side, because of the prophecy. And he was safe at Hogwarts ... because of the prophecy. Neither side could touch him for fear of destroying themselves. It was *perfect*.

Lost in his thoughts Harry didn't notice Voldemort staring at him. The Dark Lord was exceptionally pleased with his student. He had played the boy well, fuelling his desires and fears. Exposing him to darkness step by step, preparing his heir. And now Harry was ready for the last step.

"Child."

Harry was startled out of his little world at the sound of the low voice. He focused on the words.

"Come here."

Hearing the request he moved from his place near the window to the dark throne. Kneeling, he pressed his lips once against the black fabric of Voldemorts' robes. Absently he noted the elaborate black embroidery, almost invisible on the hem of the robes.

A hand landed on his head.

"You need not do that again child," the Dark Lord intoned, "I will not have my heir crawling around on his knees like a common servant. In the presence of my Death Eaters do not do that. They must respect you. They must look up to you. My boy, you are their commander now, second only to me and they must fear *you*. You must understand that respect and fear are the ways of rulers. Obedience follows both."

The icy winter wind beat flakes of snow against the window, yet the flickering torches adorning the cold stone walls gave the room a deceptive aura of warmth. As the heavy, soft drapes banished the outside world Voldemort initiated his young heir into darkness.

“Rise now,” he ordered, “and bare your arm.”

Harry stood slowly, pulling back the sleeve covering his left arm. Almost trembling with excitement he offered the pale flesh of his forearm to his master. Goosebumps appeared as the skeletal fingers closed around his slender wrist. This was the most important moment of his life.

His wand brother hung for a breathtaking second above the exposed forearm, before the tip of the wand gently made contact. The spell sounded almost like a caress, so softly was it spoken. *Mosmordre*.

Everything might have seemed like a dream up to that moment, but the pain made it real. The pain was very real. Biting back the scream threatening to escape his lips Harry watched with perverse fascination. The soft, unmarred skin burned an angry red, moving, changing shades and shapes. Turning darker, becoming clearer. Slowly the familiar scull started to appear, worming its way into the perfect skin. The pain started to reside, almost disappearing. It didn't though, not completely as a portion of it remained. A constant, throbbing, pulsing reminder of sins of the past and sins of the future.

The spell completed Voldemort released his hand, even with the loss of touch a bond remained in its place. Almost against his will Harry allowed the fabric of his robes to cover the marked arm as it fell to his side.

Lost, unsure what to do next, but filled with a need to do something, to talk to himself, to prove to himself the reality of his actions ... maybe stare at his mark, touch it, trail the contours with a fingertip Harry escaped the overwhelming presence and retreated out of the chamber. He found Draco waiting outside, not even looking bored yet. This made him glance at his watch; he was surprised to discover that the audience had lasted under half an hour. It seemed impossible that a life, a person could change so much in such a short amount of time.

Answering Malfoy's questioning look Harry pulled back his sleeve revealing the tattoo beneath. A smirk played on his lips when the Slytherin paled to an impossible shade of white. Nobody but Voldemort and Harry knew the prophecy, but Draco was smart enough to understand that Harry would never be an ordinary Death Eater. If he had displayed loyalty to Harry before, imagine his devotion after his master's heir had proved himself completely. There was no doubt in Draco's mind anymore ... this man in front of him held power ... Harry Potter could command his life. Every single feeling of resentment or envy he had felt must be buried so deep that they could never surface.

A wisp of air in the corridor; the door Harry had shut behind him banged open, making both boys twitch with surprise. There was no one standing in the arched doorway, but the deep voice of the Dark Lord reverberated out into the dim hallway.

"My boy, I did not give you permission to leave."

Harry hurriedly returned to the chamber, leaving Malfoy outside for his customary vigil. Cautiously he neared the master's throne. *Why did I leave so soon?* He felt trepidation at the thought of having displeased his lord.

Voldemort, comfortably lounging in the black chair, only seemed amused at the fear he commanded in his young heir. When Harry came to a halt before him he questioned,

"You did not think we were finished so soon, did you?"

The quiet murmur of, "My lord ..." seemed apologetic.

So the wizard continued, "I presented you to the Inner Circle once. Now that you have completely proved your dedication and loyalty I want them to know you. To recognise your authority over them."

Harry felt slightly panicked. He was not ready for this, he didn't want to leave school yet, he didn't want to leave the friends who had been returned to him only a short time before. He was sure of his allegiances, but he did not want the Order to learn the truth yet.

But ... having sworn his fidelity, he could not question the Dark Lord's wishes. He waited.

It seemed as though the ruler, occupying the seat in front of him had read his thoughts for he went on with,

"I do not think it is time for my children of the dark to learn who you are, but they should know who you are to *them*. For that purpose I have prepared a gift for you. A token for your devotion if you will, or a uniform of my lieutenant as it was intended."

Voldemort raised his wand and a swift motion accompanied by *Accio* later a parcel landed on his lap. He told Harry to step closer and take it.

Carefully unwrapping his present Harry ran his fingers across the soft velvet, before shaking the cloak out in its full beauty. A midnight black cloak with magnificent silk stitches, it resembled the robes Voldemort was wearing, being only slightly less rich in embroidery.

A tightening in his throat, but Harry managed to choke out a "Thank you."

Voldemort basked in his gratitude, looking like a cat who had swallowed canary, or made it work him.

"I want my Death Eaters to know who to obey and without exposing your face this is the only way to make distinctions between my children. But there is one person I think, who should know who you are."

The fear was back. Harry frantically thought who it could be, it was bad enough that Draco knew. But it had been unavoidable and the boy was a good actor.

"My most trusted lieutenant should learn of the change in command."

Harry's eyes widened. *Who?*

"When you stepped outside a while back I contacted Lucius Malfoy, he should be here any moment."

An uneasy silence followed and when Voldemort did not initiate further conversation, Harry's eyes travelled from ruler to his throne. A contrast with the persona of its occupant, he thought. A magnificent ebony chair, no less elaborate in decorations than its counterpart in the throne room its decorations of skilfully carved rose vines belied the evil it seated. Even the imaginable resemblance to snakes in movement did not manage to distract from the delicate beauty. On the other hand, perhaps it did suit Voldemort. The subtlety of roses ... and that of snakes.

His contemplations were interrupted when in an almost soundless movement of the door Lucius Malfoy swept into the chamber. Without sparing a glance in Harry's direction he moved up to the Dark Lord and in a practised motion bowed down to kiss the hem of his robes. Harry fought back a smirk, *he has to crawl before me*.

Harry got a good look at the straightening senior Death Eater. A tall man with ash-blond hair falling to his shoulders garbed in the traditional black robe, he looked like an angel cast into hell. A heart of darkness in an innocent casing.

When Malfoy was standing up his eyes wandered to Harry's smaller figure almost next to Voldemort. A slight flaring of nostrils was the only sign of recognition he displayed. Voldemort seemed pleased.

"Lucius," the name floated in the otherwise silent room, "you see why I have called you?"

The tall man stiffened, his eyes never leaving Harry. "I may offer a guess."

Harry felt shivers down his spine at the merciless stare, but stood his ground answering look with look.

The Dark Lord chuckled, a mirthless sound, "Indeed." A quiet second ticked by.

"I trust you with the face of my heir, Lucius. My second in command."

Still observing the green eyed boy Lucius nodded in his direction. "He is." The voice was controlled enough not to make it a question, but the slight widening of the pale grey eyes betrayed his surprise.

Harry stepped in, grasping Lucius' hand in a firm grip. The physical contact made the older wizard flinch.

Voldemort looked on to the antics of his trusted children, affirming, "He is my heir."

After the confirmation of a fact he was certain of already Malfoy returned the distinctly Muggle gesture though the frown on his face was that of pure loathing and the formality of posture implied only a fulfilment of duty.

Harry released the elegant arm feeling embarrassed at his display of lack of knowledge on wizarding etiquette in the company of the aristocratic Death Eater.

Voldemort, who as of late seemed very attuned to the feelings of his heir intervened in the proceedings, before they became too uncomfortable. Turning to Harry he said,

"I think it is time you got back my boy."

While the words were spoken he put distinct emphasis on the phrase 'my boy' making it clear to Malfoy where things stood and that arguments or opinions would not be welcome.

Harry backed to the door, leaving the two dark wizards standing close together in the chamber. As the door clicked closed behind him he heard the muffled sounds of conversation.

Draco, who no doubt had listened in, gave a Harry a congratulatory bow, bending his head slightly forward, and with a sweep of his hand allowed his superior to take the lead. Both young men Apparated back to Hogwarts.

When Harry climbed up to the Gryffindor tower his steps were lighter than ever, there was a springiness to them, absent until now. They were the steps of someone who was content with himself. No longer

was he in-between worlds. Rooted in light, by circumstances of birth ... drawn to darkness by bonds formed in youth. He was free now.

Dumbledore's words from a past long gone echoed in his mind, *the choice between what is right and what is easy* ... He had made it. His life had been difficult enough.

Without being pulled in two directions simultaneously he could be happy. He wanted to be. Harry could take the best of both worlds.

The carefree pleasures offered by Voldemort and the sweet, innocent fun of youth he could partake in the daytime world.

When Harry dreamed that night images of Hermione whispering into his ear, her soft breath on his cheeks made a smile appear on his face. The smile did not vanish when occasionally the pictures revolved, Hermione replaced by crying children from the Death Eater meetings. Torture was a normal aspect of his life now ... it didn't horrify him. Harry could appreciate the complex art of a well thought out session and it made him laugh silently in his sleep.

The nightmares where gone for good.

## **Chapter 9: Forgotten Lives**

“Hey!” Ron jumped up from his bed as the cold water hit his face. Glaring around the room his gaze settled on the perpetrator standing next to the four poster monstrosity with a wand in his hand.

“Why did you do that for?” he demanded of Harry who was at the moment unable to answer because of the hearty laughter escaping his mouth. The redhead was a funny sight indeed, with the darker freckles standing out on the pale skin and water dripping from the longish hair, gluing it to his forehead and cheeks. The angry scarlet ears sticking out from between the tufts of hair didn’t do much to make the picture more respectable.

Getting a hold of his runaway mirth Harry plumped down on the side of the slightly damp bed, tucking the wand back into his sleeve. “I’m sorry Ron. But you looked so peaceful I just couldn’t resist. Besides, it’s about time you woke up – we will miss breakfast soon.”

“Bloody hell! Why didn’t you say that sooner.” Ron scrambled into a pair of pants and a maroon sweater lying on his trunk and headed for the bathroom. Moments later when he came out he paused for a second and looked at Harry.

“Thanks,” he said quietly. He grabbed his school robes from the trunk and walked to the door. There he turned around and raising an eyebrow asked: “You coming?”

Harry smiled and went after him.

When they made it down the stairs to the common room Hermione and Ginny were already there, getting ready to leave through the portrait hole. Both boys moved to join them.

Ginny scowled when she noticed the boy he considered a seventh brother, but who had been ignoring her for the better part of a year.

“What is he doing here?” she asked dryly.

Ron had a large smile on his face. “*He* is going to breakfast with us.”



“Don’t be silly, Ron. He hasn’t done that for a while now. Why would he do that now?”

“Don’t know,” he said casually, “maybe the git has grown up and knows who his friends are.”

The bland expression on her face vanished as understanding dawned. “Oh,” she breathed, mouth slightly open, “You made up. I’m so glad Harry. Welcome back!” she added while jumping on the boy in question and giving him a huge hug.

Hermione watched them close by and offered a “Hi Harry,” before the quartet walked to the Great Hall for breakfast.

Hermione was quiet as usual during the meal, but instead of burying herself into a large volume of some sort she spent it observing Harry. Ron and Ginny both knew it was generally useless to try to make conversation with the girl, who considered meals extra studying time and directed their attention to Harry. The conversation flowing between both sides of the table, filled with occasional bursts of laughter gave Hermione ample chance to study the raven haired boy without attracting attention.

She noticed the easy manner of his speech and the ready smiles. It seemed the boy who had been her best friend for more than five years really was back to himself after the period of depression he had ignored everybody. In fact he seemed to be happier than ever before. A part of her wondered whether she had had anything to do with this and she decided to corner the boy later to administer some more of her brand of *medication*. Or at least question him thoroughly.

Hermione had her chance that afternoon when she noticed Harry leaving that Library as she was approaching it from the other direction. Quickening her stroll to a brisk walk she caught up to the boy, slowing down to walk beside him.

“So, Harry,” she began, “have you got time to talk?”

He glanced at her. “Name the time and place.” He had a mischievous twinkle to his eyes that Hermione failed to notice. Or maybe not, because she grabbed his arm and heading for the staircase said:

“Right about now. The Room of Requirement.”

After pacing a couple of times back and forth in front of the wall a door appeared that lead into a comfortably furnished Muggle style living room. They entered and stared uncertainly at each other for a while before moving to the couch and sitting down next to each other. She decided to grab the bull by the horns and pasting a cheerful smile on her face turned to look at Harry.

“So. What’s going on?”

He raised an eyebrow with an answering smile on his lips. “Going on? What to you mean by that? Nothing’s going on or well ... nothing new anyway.”

“Right. You are going to have to do better than that,” she answered crossing her arms. “You realise, of course, you been sulking about the school for most of the year and now suddenly you act as though nothing has happened. Perhaps Ron will welcome you back with open arms and no questions asked, but you can’t honestly expect me to do that.”

“Worth a try though, wasn’t it.”

The playful tone of his voice didn’t go unnoticed by Hermione even though every little inner voice she had, logic and reason, screamed at her to dig further, to discover the truth behind Harry, at that moment she really didn’t want to. A pair of bright green eyes floated before her, twinkling with happiness she hadn’t seen in a long time.

The couch they were sitting on was so warm and soft and comfortable. She felt at peace and Harry was there, sitting right next to her. *Can people really become intoxicated only by the presence of the person they love*, she wondered. To Harry she said:

“Are you all right now?”

He grasped her hands in his. “I think so. Yes, I think I might be.”

“I’m glad. You deserve it. You deserve to be happy,” she replied with conviction.

Harry was close enough to her to feel the warmth emanating from her body, the hands he still held in his were covered with a slight sheen of moisture. Unconsciously he ran a thumb across the palm her hand, pass the blue ink stain on her knuckles to the small sliver ring on her pinkie.

“Where did you get that?” He played with the ring on her finger.

“My grandmother ... when I was little,” she breathed out in the same sort of airy voice Harry had used to ask the question.

The fake cheerfulness and the real smiles they had both worn since entering had no place in this room any longer. Their expressions were serious now; it was not a time for games.

His eyes were locked in hers, his one hand concentrating on drawing smooth circles on her wrist while the other rose of its own volition to her face. It hesitated, briefly, while hovering near her bushy brown hair that fell to cover her cheeks. Her hair looked wild and coarse, yet he was sure ... yes ... it was so soft to his touch. Gently he brushed it away from her pink face. He moved closer. It seemed as though the room was building a cocoon around them. Inside were Harry and Hermione and new love that heated the space around them and outside ... outside did not exist.

He saw her mouth open slightly as a small tongue slipped out to moisten her lips. He leaned closer still, his breath quickening, his own lips parted. His eyes fell shut, but he forced them open again not wanting to miss anything. Not wanting to miss the first second he felt her breath mix with his, the widening of her eyes at the first cautious touch, the way her dark lashes lowered to cover them as she relaxed into his embrace, her lips against his.

They lost track of time, locked into their own private paradise.

A while later they sat together, with Harry's head resting on her shoulder; breathless, elevated and happy, but with reality prickling at the edges of their cocoon.

It was Hermione who voiced it first.

“What are we going to tell people? What are we going to tell Ron?”

He shifted, trying to find a more comfortable position now that she had disrupted their hour of selfishness. But Harry knew the answer to that question. *You don't really expect me to tell him, do you? I just got my life back. The life that is rightfully mine, stolen from me by the expectations of destiny. The life I had forgotten.*

“I don't want to hurt him,” he said, “Do you remember how it was in the autumn?”

She nodded pensively.

“I think we should give him more time and ... tell him when he's ready. We'll keep us a secret for now,” he concluded.

She sat up straighter. “I suppose you are right. It's just ...” she hesitated, “I hate lying to him.”

“So do I. But it really is for the best,” he said with finality and stood up from the couch. “We should be getting back now, people will be wondering where I am.”

Hermione walked towards the door beside him. “And they won't wonder about me?” she questioned.

Smirking, Harry answered: “No ... Because our resident Ms Know-It-All is in the Library, gathering some new and fascinating information for that encyclopaedia in her pretty head.”

She slapped his shoulder playfully adding, “And lucky for us they would think that.”

Upon returning to Gryffindor Tower they discovered that they had both been a little paranoid as no one had noticed anything unusual about their absence. Ron was sitting in an armchair near the windows playing a complicated-seeming game of Wizards' Chess against himself and waved them over to sit by him. He informed the pair that just moments ago Professor McGonagall had stopped by the common room to post a notice for a Hogsmeade weekend. Ron told

them that they all should go together and have some fun, but with a subtle wink at Harry Hermione shot down his idea.

She told Ron it would be impossible, because Harry had fallen behind on his studies and she had already promised to spend the weekend in the Library with him, helping him to catch up.

Ron was incredulous at the mere thought of wasting a Hogsmeade weekend on studying, but Hermione stood firm and advised him to go and enjoy himself, but with someone else. Of course she put it a bit more diplomatically.

Saturday came around and Hermione waited in the common room for Harry to come down and join her in a day on their own. She had no way of knowing that the previous night Harry's mark had burned a raw red when Lord Voldemort called his followers to his side. Harry had not yet returned from the night's *festivities*.

When Harry didn't come down she climbed the boy's staircase and entered the sixth year boy's dormitory to discover Ron frantically throwing things out of his trunk in a last minute effort to round up some more sickles for the visit to the village, alone in the room.

Hermione looked around confusedly, she had been down in the common room since early morning and was certain that Harry had not come down the stairs. She turned towards Ron.

"Where is Harry?"

"In the Library with you. Wasn't he?" He didn't bother to look at her while continuing his rummage of the old, beaten trunk.

"No. I haven't seen him at all today."

Ron stopped when the bottom of his trunk started showing and walked over to the bed where he dug a well-worn black cloak out from under the pile of things decorating his bed. He put it on and turned to face her.

“Well, then I have no idea where he is.” He moved to the door. “Are you sure you won’t change your mind and come to the village with us?”

Hermione sat on Harry’s trunk and put on a stern expression. “No. I think I’ll wait for him to show up.”

“I’ll pick you up some chocolate at Honeydukes’!” were Ron’s parting words before heading out the door.

Hermione waited, but Harry never came and soon she relocated to the Library telling herself that if he would want to find her he’d know where to look. And besides, the day couldn’t be allowed to be a complete waste, could it?

She spent the day waiting and worrying however, and when she returned to Gryffindor Tower in the evening and Ginny told her that Harry was up in his dormitory she was practically crackling with anger.

Hermione burst into the room, coming to a stop before the two boys who were playing Exploding Snap on Ron’s bed.

„Where have you been Harry?“ she asked, hands on her hips.

„I don’t know what you mean,“ he told her innocently, lights sparkling in his eyes as he looked at the annoyed girl glaring daggers at him.

„Stop it,“ she ordered, „You have never been one to play games with people.“

Ron broke in, “Leave the man alone Hermione. It’s the gits’ own business if or when he tells us where he went off to.” When saying the word *git*, he looked at Harry and smiled showing there were no hard feelings and that *he* probably knew where Harry had been.

Hermione ignored Ron’s comment and grabbing Harry’s hand tried to pull him out of the room. „Come on Harry, I am going to talk to you about this whether you like it or not. And we are going to talk somewhere we are not interrupted constantly.“

Harry resisted her efforts, but when Ron winked at him wishing, „Good luck, mate,“ he allowed himself to be dragged out of the dormitory.

Out the portrait hole, down some stairs, through hallways and passages, to an abandoned corridor where Hermione started pacing back and forth. When the door appeared she pushed the boy in. As it clicked shut she whirled around to face him.

“Tell me. Tell me what’s going on, where have you been. Tell me!”

Harry stood, looking at the girl in front of him.

She loved him. She had made that clear, plain as day. She was beautiful, he respected her, and he liked her. He liked to hold her; and he was as sure as any sixteen year old boy could be that he loved her too. But he couldn’t trust her. Harry could not trust anybody.

His life was a mess of lies, a pit of madness ... yet he was having fun. He really was. For the first time in his life there were no limitations on him. He could be anyone, play any part, do anything. He was an enthusiastic student, a witty and entertaining friend and a caring boyfriend. And he was a loyal son.

He was everything he was expected to be. No matter where he went or what he did people were pleased and happy with him.

In spite of all the secrets, the sleepless nights – for one reason or another – and the constant sneaking around he felt content. It seemed strange, but his life was simpler somehow, easier. He wanted everything to continue as it was and that meant ...

“I’m sorry,” he said, “I really am, but I can’t tell you.”

His eyes were pleading with her. “You must trust me and allow me my secrets.” *My secrets allow me my freedom.*

She breathed out slowly. And breathed in again. Ticking heartbeats echoed in the dark room. Finally she spoke:

“What do you want from me Harry?” She sounded sad, almost desperate. “Why do you ask me to trust you when you obviously cannot trust me. Have I not earned your trust by now?” Her voice broke. “Must I prove myself to you?”

*You don't understand, my girl. It's not just my secrets I don't trust you with. I do trust you to love me, but do you want me above everything else. Can you love my secret as you love the boy you think you know? Do you want me*

Something glittered in the darkness of the otherwise empty room, catching his attention. Harry hid his smile when he caught sight of what the room had conjured for this visit.

He grabbed Hermione by the elbow, startling her, and turned her around to look at the same direction as he. She gasped. In wonder she stuttered:

“Is that – is that –“

A mirror stood in the open space before them, its frame, adorned by an engraved sentence, was polished to a golden shine.

Harry and Hermione stood side by side staring into the ancient mirror. With sparkling eyes and a smile on her lips Hermione spoke:

“Erised ...”

The reflection of the happy girl turned to the boy next to her. “I always wished I could see it ...” And froze, seeing the empty space beside her.

“Harry,” she questioned, “where did you ...”

Hidden in the darkest shadows several steps away from her a raven haired boy smiled. *Hearts' true desire.*

When Hermione started looking around for him he returned to her side and gently kissing the tip of her nose told her:

“I will tell you everything. Soon. I promise.”



Still wearing a sort of dazed smile Hermione followed him out of the Room of Requirement.

As the gentle winds of spring swept across the lake Hermione and Harry started their daily tradition of late night walks on the castle grounds, sometimes even wandering as far as the border of the Forbidden Forest where the winter snow had started to melt, revealing the soft mushy earth beneath.

They snuck out under Harry's Invisibility Cloak and took the sort of aimless walks that couples in love do. Holding each others hands, pausing occasionally for a kiss and talking about unimportant, trivial things just to hear each others voices and sometimes about nothing at all enjoying the comfortable quiet.

On one of those nights in early March they stood in the shadow of the eastern wall of the castle. Harry had pressed her against the mossy wall and was covering her white neck with soft kisses when suddenly his breath hitched in pain and he resisted the urge to grab his left arm. The burning sensation was painfully intense and required immediate action.

He reluctantly let go of Hermione. "It's getting late. I think we should get back to the castle."

"It's not that late. We been out a lot longer before," she said, her brow furrowed.

"I know but I'm feeling a bit sleepy tonight." He had to clench his teeth to keep crying out from the pain; Lord Voldemort was impatient tonight. He could barely think straight as he started to drape the Invisibility Cloak around Hermione's shoulders.

The Cloak firmly in place he pulled her along towards the castle entrance, right before reaching the door he stopped and made a show patting his pockets in confusion. Finally he said:

"I think I dropped my practise snitch somewhere."

Looking down to the ground he didn't notice her raised eyebrows.

“I’ll go back and look for it ... There is no reason for you to come, just go inside and I will see you tomorrow,” he continued.

He looked up and smiled crookedly as Hermione threw her arms around him in a tight hug. “Alright,” she whispered, “see you tomorrow.”

Harry let go of her and walked back down the trail, his mind so occluded by pain he never realised the castle doors did not open and a new weight was resting in his pocket.

From the Forbidden Forest he Apparated to his master.

## **Chapter 10: The Darkness Within**

The plans were laid out on the table – small scraps of parchment covered with hasty, ink stained notes and musty old rolls, only recently uncovered from hidden vaults.

Harry paused briefly at the door, before striding in confidently to join the two men currently immersed in the various documents. A hiss of breath escaped his lips when he realised what the parchments before him meant. Lucius, who had not reacted to approaching footsteps glanced at him and a cruel smile brushed his face. Scared yet? It seemed to say.

The green eyes narrowed in response and the young wizard reached out to pick up one of the documents, suppressing the urge to pick a fight with Lucius Malfoy.

Satisfied with the self-control demonstrated by two of his most high ranking Death Eaters Lord Voldemort greeted Harry. And looking at the parchment in his hand added:

“You see, my boy. Soon our victory will be at hand and the wizarding world will be reminded of their immense stupidity in going against their rightful master. We will rule the world.”

It sounded like a rehearsed speech but Harry was too involved already with the idea laid out before him and far too loyal to the Dark Wizard to even notice. He understood now the impatience that had caused his Mark to flare to life in such a painful and abrupt manner.

“Come,” his master said, drawing him into the conversation.

The three of them leaned over the black wooden table, that gave Voldemorts’ audience chamber a more contemporary look. Even though the heavy curtains were still drawn the room was lighted brightly as suitable for a more business-like meeting. With the book and paper laden table this one corner resembled an ordinary wizard office, the kind he had seen in the Ministry on his first visit.

Lucius was tracing a line with his fingernail on a huge slightly rumpled parchment, carefully as not to smudge the light blue ink, faded by

time. Harry stepped closer, looking over his shoulder to the building blueprint in the other man's hands. He pointed to a spot on the edge.

"I think this would be a suitable alternative exit."

He felt the blond wizard twitch with distaste. Probably at the idea of having to listen to Harry's opinions or suggestions. Still he knew his place in the pecking order and reluctantly nodded.

"Yes, I think you might be right." His carefully manicured finger tapped on the place in question, a small rectangle.

At that point a hesitant scratching from the door caught Harry's attention. Startled, he pulled the hood of his black cape over his head and turned to face the windows. And not a moment too soon as the door opened and a grumpy looking old man entered, dressed in a worn grey robe. Fearfully he shuffled closer to the Dark Lord, who was looking somewhat annoyed at the interruption.

Carefully, Harry dared a peek over his shoulder – the old man was whispering something to his master and the red-eyed wizard was looking not at all pleased with the information he had received. He exited the room with the servant without saying a word to Lucius nor Harry.

After a few minutes of uneasy silence Malfoy squared his shoulders and wiping an imaginary speck of dust from his rich velvet cloak followed Voldemort. As the door started to close Harry sprouted to action and left the room to find out what had caused the interruption.

He went stalking through the dimly lit corridors, stumbling on crumbling steps when an ancient torch failed to give enough light. His lord was nowhere to be found. Harry ventured into parts of the mansion he had not visited before, hoping at least to find a servant who could tell him *something*. When he passed a musty gobelin a hand reached out to grab hold of his cloak. He was pulled into a narrow, dust-filled niche and the tapestry fell back in place leaving him coughing, annoyed and completely in the dark. Both literally and figuratively. Whirling around he grabbed his wand and pointed it at the perpetrator. Before he got out a spell, however ...

"My lord has asked me to relay some information to you before you leave for Hogwarts, Potter," the soft hiss sounded awfully loud in the small dark space.

Harry jumped back as if stung. "Do not say my name out loud! *Your* lord has ordered that no one learn my identity and you gamble with it. I am your lord's heir and you *will* address me appropriately."

Someone let out a breath.

"*Lumos.*" The spell lit the room, revealing the cold, narrow face of Lucius Malfoy close to his.

Malfoy's mouth tightened with distaste. "My apologies," he paused before adding in a perfectly flat tone, "Sir." It could not have sounded more like an insult if he had called him a Mudblood right into his face.

"Well. What is it?" Impatient green eyes met grey.

A hint of a smirk brushed the older Death Eater's face as he looked at Harry and moved past him to where the tapestry covered the entrance. Lifting it with one hand he stepped out and turned towards Harry, all in one smooth motion.

"The Dark Lord wishes to see you." He lifted a hand and pointed towards the stairs, almost invisible in the distance of the long corridor. "First door to the left." And walked off in the opposite direction, the knowing smirk still gracing his face.

It made Harry feel uneasy, but nevertheless he moved down the corridor as directed. Nearing the stairs he heard voices, drifting from ahead.

He paused before a rusty old door in what he determined must be the dungeons. The voices were louder there.

A muffled statement followed by a loud cry, "That is not true! You are lying."

Even obscured by the iron door he could hear the disgust mingled with disbelief in that desperate shout. In that feminine voice he had heard so often and recognised immediately.

*NO.* He fought to resist the dark haze threatening to obscure his vision. *How?*

He knew without doubt that when he stepped through the door that disbelief in her voice would turn to betrayal, maybe denial. He was not sure which would be worse. Suppressing the shudder threatening to mar his posture he opened the door and entered.

It was a dungeon cell, barely large enough to fit two let alone the three people that now occupied the room. The door creaked, the sound of the hinges, un-oiled and rusty with time screeching his ears and catching the attention of the pair.

A mass of black and brown flew to his arms as the cell door fell shut. He felt smothered in the warmth of that embrace, the loose strands of hair tickled his nose, yet he felt comforted and at ease in those arms.

“Hermione ...” he whispered stroking the soft locks.

Her body went stiff. The Dark Lord coughed. She looked up and met his eyes.

“Harry,” she said. She took a step back, pushing him away with outstretched hands. “You *are* here. He said ... but ...”

The girl stumbled backwards in a sudden panic. Something wild flickered in the velvety brown eyes. She pushed herself against the far wall. It was not far enough – she wanted to melt into the stones. Only pure stubbornness or perhaps the vaulted Gryffindor bravery held her up.

Yes, the latter came to play as her breathing calmed down and Harry could almost see the cogs turning in her head, analyzing, evaluating the situation she now faced.

But how could she *be* in this situation? Harry did not understand. Tearing his eyes away from his girlfriend he finally approached his

lord, who until that point had leaned casually against a cell wall, observing the proceedings play out before him with the disinterested air of laziness often found in someone entirely too used to high emotion drama.

“You promised!” Harry yelled to his face, forgetting for a moment who it was that stood before him.

“You promised that none of my friends would be harmed!”

Harry’s hands balled into fists on his sides and only the slow, confident drawl stopped him from doing anything rash.

“I remember promising no such thing, my boy.”

Perhaps realising that this was not a time to play games with words and intentions Voldemort hastened to continue before Harry could utter a protest.

“However even without making such a promise ...” he stopped. “My b – Harry, I would never order the capture of one of your friends.” The timber of his voice through the explanation was patient and almost tender, like that of a parent explaining something to his child.

“You are my heir.”

The girl in the corner let out a gasp. But she went unnoticed as Voldemort concentrated on his young ward.

He continued, “She found this place. She came *here*.”

Harry’s brow furrowed. “But how?”

Lord Voldemort took a small silver ball from his pocket and threw it to Harry. “It’s called a Vestigia.”

“I’m certain that if you look you will find one somewhere on your person,” he added as Harry examined the object.

Harry looked up in confusion. “But what does it *do*?”

“Aah, I think that Miss ... Granger, was it? is perfectly capable of explaining it to you. After all, my servants did find it on her person.”

Harry glanced at her. She refused to meet his look and seemed determined to ignore the dark wizards confined with her. Voldemort followed his gaze. “I think we should take this conversation outside,” he said, “it is rather damp in here and we wouldn’t want to damage your health.”

Taking the young wizard by the arm Voldemort guided him outside. And with a wave of his hand the cell door closed, iron bolts clamping to place.

“Where were we? Oh yes – the Vestigia.” He took the ball from Harry and showed a small button hidden in it’s curve. “When activated it traces the *Apparition* signature of the person carrying it’s companion. Very advanced magic and most certainly not sixth year level. Indeed I wonder ...” he trailed off looking at the door.

But Harry had caught on to what he had said. “You are trying to say she followed me here. *Hermione* placed a tracer on me and followed me here?”

“Yes,” Voldemort answered simply, “she did.”

Confused and lost Harry asked him why.

“That I do not know.” Lord Voldemort seemed almost uncomfortable when he spoke again, “You do realise that now she is here I cannot allow for her to leave. She is a risk to us all.”

Harry’s eyes widened in horror. “You cannot mean to keep her here!”

“I’m afraid it is necessary. It is for your own good my boy, she is a danger,” he explained patiently.

“Then let me talk to her, make her understand. She will listen to me. She loves me!”

Red eyes in a skeletal face glinted in the dim passage. “And do you love her?”



"I don't know ... maybe," Harry whispered.

"Then she is not only a danger but a weakness."

Harry's shoulders straightened with new determination.

"Still ... If I lose her, I will always blame you." The soft hiss was laced with absolute conviction.

That caught Voldemorts' attention. With a movement almost too swift to detect the skeletal hand came close to Harry's throat and then – stopped. Lord Voldemort spoke, but there was nothing tender in his voice anymore, it was cold and harsh and emotionless, reminding Harry that this person was a ruler, a commander of a vast army and he expected obedience. Even from him.

"I see. Then, by all means, try to convince her." And the Dark Lord walked off, down the corridor where torches flared to life and died in his passing.

Harry waited a while and then entered the cell and closed the door. He looked around. She had was an unmoving heap in the corner.

"Hermione." One word. A breath escaping his lips, a plea, a prayer; an admission.

He fell onto the floor next to her, positioning himself as close as he could get to the silent girl. The black cloak he wore pooled into a fan around him as he settled in. Not looking at the unmoving, closed eyed figure beside him Harry began, hesitantly at first and then picking up speed as confidence and passion grew.

"Do you know that old saying about the world being a stage and all the men and women players. People play a part. That is what I have been doing ever since learning I was a wizard and came to Hogwarts. I was told who I was and who the bad guys were and I made a choice. An *eleven year old* made a choice based on what people I saw as my rescuers had told me, what was expected of me. I never asked for it, I was thrust into a strange world where I was a hero. You know, it did not take me long to understand that heroes have a bad habit of getting hurt or worse. But I made friends, good friends, and kept on

going; there was really no other choice open for me. But there is now ...

“Hermione you must understand I did not do this to betray you. I took this mark to find myself ... never to hurt you. I love you,” He reached out a hand to force the girl to look him in the eyes. She struggled a little, backing further into the corner, but with his touch the deep brown eyes opened and gazed right into his. The face staring back at him was cold, expressionless, there were salty stains of dried tears on the pale cheeks, but the eyes. The eyes ... There was something there he was sure of it. A burning deep flame, rage, fire, sadness, hurt, pain, loss, understanding, love. His heart hitched. The emotional spectrum shining in those dark orbs ignited a spark of hope. He unfolded the other arm sitting in his lap intending to use both his hands to cup her beautiful face in his hands, to cover the soft skin with his kisses, to beg understanding, to rejoice in understanding.

But as he moved so did she. The dark eyelashes fluttered when a curtain covered his hope for redemption and flinching away she pulled her knees closer to her body, the knuckles on the hands binding her legs turned whiter with pressure as she forced herself into a tighter ball against the damp grey wall. With those closed eyes that shut the world out she could have been a light marble statue, crammed into a dark corner, but for the occasional shiver that ran through her body that found no warmth in the stone-walled chamber.

“I love you,” the dark man next to the girl repeated. “Whatever you understand, or think you understand you must believe I love you. You must!”

He got no response.

A fear crept around the heart he had thought to be a block of ice by now. But the ice was shattering as a colder, sharper presence made itself known. He was not supposed to feel like this ever again. The frosty tendrils of loss slithered around his heart, looking for a way in. He could feel them there, waiting. *No*, he wanted to crush those treasonous feelings, that betrayed his weakness.

He loved her. Besides laughter love could bring pain. Why hadn't he understood that before? Pain and loss. He would lose her.

*NO! I can't, I will not.*

*'Just like everyone you have loved. You will lose her too.'*

"I cannot lose her." He did not seem to realise he was repeating that phrase out loud, rocking back and forth. "I cannot lose her ... "

He did not pay attention to his surroundings anymore, so lost was he inside his own mind ... in the battle in his mind. He would not have heard a breath nor felt a touch if not for the warmth. The warmth of human contact that heated the daggers around his heart until they melted. Suddenly he heard the breath of words on his neck and felt a slender arm around his shoulders.

He leaned in closer, wrapping them both in the rich velvet cloak, hugging her so tight that he would have almost expected her to cry out in pain. But all she did was hug him back, all the while continuing the mantra she had begun in response to his own desperate pleas:

"You won't lose me. You will not. You will not ... "

He felt the wetness of new tears against his cheek; he was not sure whether they were hers or his. It did not matter, she had forgiven and understood. She knew and she was still with him.

A flickering thought crossed his mind. What would have happened had she not embraced him at that crucial moment. He knew now that he would not be able to bare losing her and if it had come to the choice between Hermione and Lord Voldemort, between family ... It did not matter anymore. The thought was banished from his mind almost simultaneously with its unwanted arrival.

He didn't let go of her when the feverish whisperings subsided and the suddenly clear frightened eyes bore into his.

"Harry," she seemed almost afraid to speak, clinging to his presence, drinking it in.

"Harry," she began again, "What now? What do we do know? What happens now?"

His gaze was intense, his grip on her hands painful. "We will be together," He wasn't letting go of her. "No matter what happens we will be together ... and we do what we must. What it takes."

Her hands slipped down into his as they stood up face to face. Slowly, she nodded. "Whatever it takes."

He could feel the liquid warmth in the palms of his hands as the half-moon impressions of her fingernails dug deeper into the flesh.

*My soul is dark with blood and so will be yours. Do you understand that, my beautiful girl? If you truly understood you would run, screaming.* He did not voice those thoughts. He had everything he ever wanted now and he had learned selfishness. He would not give up what was offered.

Still holding his hand she asked, "Will it hurt?"

"Yes."

## **Chapter 11: Young Gods**

One thing that always shows the true value of a person is the amount of trust his friends have in him. In Harry's case, that was not entirely correct for he was about to initiate his best friend to a hellish existence, introduce her to everything she had ever fought against and make her betray all that she believed in.

Well, perhaps not everything – she still had him and her love for him. But even that love was a twisted thing. She didn't even know him anymore, there was the idea of Harry she imagined herself in love with. Hermione, being an organised and logical person, had decided when she first recognised her feelings, that her life would be spent with Harry at her side. No matter what.

And now it was too late for reconsiderations or second thoughts. When Harry pulled her out of that cell she knew what she was getting herself into. She really did.

Hand in hand they exited the little room where Harry had gambled with his soul and lost. The one person, who could have dragged him back from the precarious edge the abyss Voldemort represented, stepped forth and let herself be pulled into darkness alongside him.

They walked the passageway out of the dungeons, Harry gently guiding her through the labyrinth of corridors until they came to a door. Dark, imposing and beautiful – it was the final place she could change her mind. Pull herself from his hold and run as fast as she could.

Run with the devil on her heels, her cloak a billowing mess behind her, breath coming in fast and erratic gasps. She could still make that desperate bid for freedom and sanity.

Harry stared at that door with a terribly nauseous feeling in his stomach. He felt the tiny hairs on the back of his neck curl with moisture.

Impulsively he tightened his grip on Hermione's hand and threw a glance at her over his shoulder. She was looking down at their

entwined fingers. Perhaps feeling the eyes on her, she looked up and gave him a small smile.

Then, she pushed the door open.

The first thing that Harry noticed was that the table was gone and with it every scrap of parchment that had been on it. The chamber looked as it had when he first travelled there in the company of Draco Malfoy. How menacing it had seemed to a young boy about to start the performance of his life – for his life.

She shivered at his side, stepping closer so their shoulders almost touched. He wanted to smile: he felt as excited as she did ... but, her hand was icy cold and in the brown eyes he spotted a sudden panic as she stared at *him*, the Dark Lord. It was her first time too see the infamous wizard.

Voldemort was sitting in his rose throne, basking in the warmth of the torchlight. Much like a snake, who draws in the sun on some warm rock during a hot summer. His eyes were half-closed, calculating red slits that casually observed the young pair before him.

He noticed the forcedly confident poise of his heir and the unconscious clinging of the girl. The Mudblood. Yet of whom he knew from his spies and servants and, lately, from his own experience, that she probably was the smartest which of the generation. With an inward smile he noted their closeness: and she could be controlled.

He opened his eyes fully and grinned. Hermione smothered a hysterical urge to laugh – quite suddenly he reminded her of a certain orange Halloween decoration.

“I assume you have some news for me,” Voldemort addressed Harry.

“My lord, I have spoken to Hermione and she will not betray my secret. Nor yours,” he hastened to add.

“Indeed. She has promised all that and now she expects me to let her walk right out of here, straight into Dumbledore’s stronghold.” The red eyes narrowed dangerously and the 's's in his words became more pronounced.

Hermione spoke up, "Sir, I don't expect anything, I –"

She was cut off as Voldemort lashed out, "Silence! I will not tolerate a Mudblood speaking to me." He reached for his wand, a curse already on his lips.

But as the wand rose Harry stepped in front of the wide-eyed girl and as swiftly the wand disappeared into the sleeve of Voldemort's robes. The terrifying rage gave way to a pleasant smile directed at Harry.

"My boy, surely you understand I am going to need some kind of proof of these *changed* loyalties."

"She is loyal to me, my lord, and I am to you," Harry answered.

Voldemort was drumming his fingers against the armrest. "It is not her feelings for you, but her devotion to me and our cause I do not believe." He looked straight at Hermione, "You see, smart is always trouble, and clever witch that she is, she might take it upon herself to decide what is best for you. And *somehow* she might come to the conclusion I am not it. We cannot have her running to Dumbledore, ready to expose everything we want kept secret."

Hermione twitched under his glare and two bright red spots appeared on her cheeks. She looked away.

Lord Voldemort smirked. "You see," he turned towards Harry, "what her loyalty is worth."

Harry was beginning to get frustrated and not a little nervous. "But, my lord –"

"Enough!"

Shocked silence reigned the room after Voldemort's outburst.

"If you think you can convince me by arguing you are mistaken."

The unmistakable menace in that quiet voice reminded Harry of *before*. Of the time he still hated Voldemort and feared him. He did not wish to return to that era and thus ceased his argument.

The Dark Lord leaned back in his throne, almost lounging. "Better."

He looked at Hermione. "Now, tell me girl, do you wish to swear me obedience?"

"I ... I –" she hesitated, took a deep breath and then held her chin up defiantly, "Yes. I'll join Harry."

Lord Voldemort's voice was deceptively amused and conceding, "How loving of you."

"Are you certain, you can't do without her?" he glanced at Harry. Without waiting for a reply he continued, "Very well, consider her a gift. And," the timbre of his voice dropped lower, to that almost caressing tone he often used with Harry, "remember, even you can run out of favours and gifts, my boy."

Harry instinctively responded to the soft hiss of his voice. His hand untwined from Hermione's and his feet carried him to the ebony throne. In relief, in gratitude he fell to his knees on the first step.

Voldemort, focusing solely on him, slowly reached out with his hand and Harry grabbed it, fervently kissing the parchment-dry fingers.

"Thank you," he whispered, and smiled.

He had almost forgotten Hermione, standing alone in the middle of the room, when the dark wizard spoke.

"Girl," he told her, "come here."

As she walked closer Harry got up to stand in his usual place at Voldemort's right side. When she stopped hesitantly at the foot of the throne he gave her an encouraging smile.

Her gaze flickered from Master to heir, caught somewhere between trepidation and trust.

Voldemort pulled a wand from the folds of his robes. He held it temptingly before her, but she did not reach out to grab it. Instead she waited. And after a while the wizard gave a sudden laugh. In the



instant it started and stopped she jerked back with a shudder, the tension of the situation had her nerves high-strung.

“So you will serve me out of loyalty to my heir? So be it. But understand girl, this boy *is* my heir. We are connected, he and I, betray one betray the other.”

That jump started her brain and pushed her into the inquisitive student mode. “What do you mean – connected?”

The thin line of Voldemort’s mouth twitched, either in amusement or annoyance.

“As the famous prophecy says: *Neither can live while the other does not...*”

Her mind went blank. *Merlin*. Looking at Harry’s uncomfortable expression she thought she finally understood everything.

Startling her out of her thoughts, her wand came close to her face.

“Take it,” the Dark Lord ordered.

As her fingertips closed around the familiar polished wood a skeletal hand flashed out, closing in an iron grip around her wrist. Holding her hand tightly in place Voldemort turned towards Harry, hissing,

“She *did* choose to serve you.”

With the other hand he tugged up the tattered sleeve of her robes.

Harry gulped.

His eyes locked with Hermione’s, the message was clear – *trust me* – and placed the tip of his wand on her skin.

The smell of pine torches and living fire hung in the air.

Brown eyes bore into green.

He said the incantation.

And magic came to life, darkness burning itself to innocent skin.

There was so much pain in her eyes, betrayal and trust.

When she started screaming Voldemort laughed. And did not stop, but the burning did. The smell of pine was still in the air and her eyes were still beautiful and trusting. But everything was different now, everything.

“Go home, children,” the Master ordered between bursts of cruel mirth.

They went. He was still laughing as the door closed.

Time flew by. They were not called to Voldemort and, deciding that it would be too dangerous to discuss anything related to their *night jobs* while at Hogwarts, it was easy to pretend it had never happened. The marks on their arms did not exist.

The Easter Holidays were fast approaching and Ron kept on pestering Harry with requests to join him and the assorted Weasleys at the Burrow, but Harry was adamant in his refusal and finally the redhead gave up, throwing his hands in the air and using the – *Fine. But you’ll regret it.* – statement.

Hermione received an owl from her parents, asking her to come home. She wrote them back, telling that since the end of year exams were fast approaching she would need the lesson-free time for studying.

Her decision to stay at Hogwarts also relieved Ron’s conscious over leaving his best friend alone again. Easter was different from Christmas, however, in the fact, that during this holiday the majority of students remained at school. The Weasleys were one of the few students leaving for home. Them, and Draco Malfoy with some other Slytherins. But that was knowledge Harry was not supposed to have, or could not admit to having to any of his fellow Gryffindors.

On the second night of Easter his Mark burned after a long respite. He squirmed in pain, the crisp white sheets twisting around his legs

when he bit his lip to keep from crying out and alerting his sleeping roommates.

When the scorching pain subsided, leaving him gasping for air, Harry silently eased himself out of the bed. He took his wand and cast a silencing charm around the near vicinity of his bed and trunk. Fumbling in the darkness he gathered his school robes and the Death Eater attire, meant to disguise and distinguish him from all the other members of Voldemort's Inner Circle. He bundled up the ball of cloth and crept downstairs to the Common Room.

Hermione was already waiting for him there, all the sleepiness drawn out of wild brown eyes that stared questioningly into his.

"What do think he wants?" she whispered, her voice breaking with fear.

Harry looked over his shoulder while struggling into his robes, "I cannot know for sure, but it's better we get there soon." He finished his dressing by throwing the black cloak Voldemort had given him over his usual attire and took her hand, kissing her fingers sweetly, "Come on. Hurry," and helped her out of the Portrait Hole.

On their way to the Entrance Hall, they had to dodge Mrs Norris out and about on her usual student-hunting spree, but made it to the Forbidden Forest without discovery.

Assuming, they were not the only Death Eaters Voldemort had called, they were early: the audience chamber was empty. Harry followed Hermione into the room she had visited only once before and closed the heavy wooden door with a thud behind them.

It was a strange feeling to be alone with her in a room that to him was always associated with the Dark Lord. This was the place he had first fallen to his knees in front of a man he had born to hate and, somehow, learned to serve. He had killed in this room. He had betrayed in this room, and he had taken her soul in it and bound Hermione to him for all time.

A lot had happened to him in the audience chamber, choices had been made, paths chosen and lives altered.

The round, document-laden table stood in the corner, like on *that* day, weeks ago – he lowered his eyes in realisation that the time had arrived. The corner of his mouth twitched. *No going back now. Nothing can save her.* Hermione was walking towards the table, her natural curiosity getting the better of her.

He stood still, watching as she stopped and picked up a roll of parchment. He did not need to see it, to know that her eyes were devouring the contents, her mind stitching pieces of information together and coming to the inevitable conclusion. He could pinpoint the exact moment realisation dawned: her mouth formed into a precise little 'o' and the parchment dropped from suddenly trembling fingers. She stared ahead, unseeing and moving closer he could see the large blue vein on her neck pulsing rapidly.

He touched her arm, she jumped, whirling around to face him.

He lifted a questioning eyebrow and bent down to pick up the fallen document and place it back on the table.

Her fingers dug into his biceps almost frantically.

"He can't," she said. Shaking her head, she added, "I can't ..."

Harry pried her fingers from his arm and took both her hands in his, forcing her to look him in the eye. Hers were wild and lost. "Harry, we cannot do this. It's –"

"War, Hermione. It's war. And this is our best chance to win it."

Hermione bit her lip. "But –" she seemed to have to trouble expressing herself. "But we can't *actually* do this."

He dropped her hands. "What do you think this is? A *game*? Did you get yourself into this, thinking it was like changing political parties in the Muggle world? Swift and painless and nobody is going to get hurt."

He yanked up her sleeve, hissing, "And what do you think this is? A membership card?" As his fingers brushed the black skull, Harry felt it warm under his touch and he felt an irresistible urge to press his hand

to it, to squeeze it, to scratch it, to hold it until it *burned* with magic and pain and *his will*.

He felt emptiness envelop him, until only the darkness remained, the throbbing red and orange and black thing that connected him to Hermione. *I am connected to her. I control her. I –*

He felt her breath on his skin, hot and erratic. Soft locks tickled his cheek, and he opened his eyes.

She was so close he could smell her soap and count the tiny freckles on her nose. Calmness flooded into him, her will soothed him.

He felt like himself again.

“You know, what is at stake,” he coughed, “we cannot lose this war. And when this battle is won everything will be easier.”

She had collected herself with remarkable skill and even managed a smile. “Then we will win it.”

He moved closer, hugging her, when the door banged open.

Lord Voldemort strode in smirking as he saw them jump apart. He carelessly threw them a couple of golden stars tangling on chains. “They’re emergency portkeys back here. Use them only in a very dire emergency. Otherwise go straight back to your dormitories; we cannot have you suspiciously absent, when Dumbledore comes looking. Understand, only in an emergency.”

When they both nodded, sliding the chains over their heads, he told them to, “Follow me.”

The young couple walked behind him through the corridors, carefully adjusting the silvery white masks to hide their faces and the deep-hooded black cloaks to hide their forms.

The doors of the Great Hall fell open before them, their steps echoed on the floor. In complete silence, they walked to where the rest of the Inner Circle stood. Lord Voldemort settled on his throne and Harry went to his usual place at his right hand, pulling Hermione with him

and ignoring the looks he was getting from the rest of assembled Death Eater royalty.

When all movement stopped, the room was bathed in light. And as he had expected, and somewhat dreaded, it was filled with people – the army he remembered from the revel. Only, this time they were not here to party, they were here to work.

Their Master opened his mouth and spoke.

His voice growled with quiet thunder, reaching the hearts of men standing before him, infusing them with purpose. “Tonight we fight, tonight we win,” he said. “Tonight is the beginning of the end. We will take the Ministry.”

Cheers erupted; chants for their Lord swept the room. An army in black, an army of hundreds of wizard and witches stood, shouting for victory. Harry felt the emotions boiling inside him, his heartbeat became faster, and faster. Standing beside the commander of this noble army, he felt Hermione shiver with excitement as her hand brushed his. He closed his eyes, feeling the moment.

The collective magic of mass Apparition made him weak on his knees. When he opened his eyes once again, the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic came to view.

He heard someone start screaming, she would not be the last this night. The black-robed figures moved to connecting corridors, spreading like the tendrils of a giant octopus. Strangling, blinding, killing everything in its way.

A blue-robed Auror had somehow managed to make it close to them. He had his wand pointed at Hermione. She froze, and Harry shouted out the cutting hex.

Blood splattered on her white mask.

Noise and action around them resumed.

The thick, musty smell of blood hung in the air.

## **Chapter 12: A Spy In Need**

Have you ever wondered what it feels like, to have death all around you? When everywhere you look, you see people lying like ragged life-sized dolls. On the floor, hunched against the walls. When you move through the corridors, up the stairs, you want to close your eyes so as not to see them, their glass-eyed, unmoving, accusing stare. But you *have* to look, you can't turn away from the lumps of skin and clothes, sometimes smeared with blood, sometimes not. You cannot look away, because somehow it would be worse.

Have you walked through air, so thick with the stench of blood and vomit, it is almost tangible?

Have you ever wondered that?

Harry doesn't wonder; he knows. It was a massacre at the Ministry of Magic. The Aurors were unprepared, the civilian staff untrained. Their mockery of a resistance was butchered.

A handful of volunteers stood in protection of the last un-breached door. Sacrificing their lives until the authority that kept the wizarding world operating escaped through an unmarked floor exit: members of the Wizengamot, Department Heads, the Minister.

When Death Eaters finally destroyed the last obstacle and entered the room, Voldemort was enraged, striking down the unfortunate wizards near him. But they were not to blame – the only people, who knew of the planned attack were Lucius Malfoy, Harry and Voldemort himself.

Punishments would be dealt with later, now it was time to retreat before the escapees sent reinforcements – highly trained Aurors, who knew the situation they were walking into.

Voldemort was the first to Apparate away, leaving behind his Death Eaters, who were to collect anything useful, and Harry, with Hermione at his side. The young couple had spent the battle in a protective circle, sheltering them from an outright attack.

Hermione, no matter how smart, had no fighting experience and Harry was someone Voldemort simply could not allow to be harmed.

The only close call was, when some Aurors determined that such a knot of Death Eaters – clearly guarding something important – was a worthwhile suicide mission.

The first blue-robed attacker, Harry had killed. The others did not even get close to their targets; stopped by the wizards surrounding Harry and Hermione. One Auror managed to hit a Death Eater who was standing almost next to Harry, though, cutting away her hood, making her mask drop.

For Harry, the moment he realised Bellatrix Lestrange was standing within touching distance, was the clearest in the madness of battle.

He pointed his wand at her and muttered the slashing hex: he didn't want her dead, not yet; he wanted her hurt and bleeding. That proved to be a mistake. When the cut slashed across the side of her neck, she whirled around, searching with her eyes – dark from madness and pain.

Upon spotting Harry, the realisation she had been attacked by the person she was supposed to be guarding did not stop her from retaliating. Sharp pain soared up Harry's right arm, almost making him drop his wand.

He instinctively grabbed the source of discomfort with his other hand, and looking down, he saw blood oozing from between his fingers. His knees felt weak and through a red haze he saw Bellatrix approaching with a vicious, crazy smile on her lips.

He tried to lift his wand. Couldn't.

And then she stopped, a look of surprised confusion crossing her face. She was rising, slowly, feet first, robes billowing around her head. Her wand clattered to the ground.

About ten feet in the air, the movement ceased.



With a yelp she met the ground, head first. Her eyelid twitched; there was a trickle of blood dripping from her ear.

Harry looked to his side; Hermione lowered her wand in a pale, shaking hand, she had bite marks on her lip. Bellatrix Lestrange died an almost innocent death – a simple first year spell, used for protection: *Wingardium Leviosa*.

Harry crumbled to the ground, eyes rolled back in his head.

Everything went dark.

He concentrated on his breathing – in and out, in and out. Something tickled his nose, hesitant fingertips run across his arm, flashes of pain travelled his body. Cautiously he opened his eyes and a pale, inhuman face swam into view.

Startled, he jerked backwards, dragging his body along on his elbows. But the thing with the white face was holding onto his robes; wasn't allowing his escape. It was talking, but the lips weren't moving.

He heard better now, the awful quiet pounding in his ears was receding. Out of the silence, he heard a girl call,

“Are you alright?” The hands were gripping his robes.

“Hush,” she made calming noises. “Don't try to move, you were hit with a curse.” The concern was evident in that girlish voice, coming from the white face.

And then he remembered again. It was just a mask, and ...

“Herm –” His throat felt dry and his voice broke. Coughing he tried again. “It's alright. My head hurts.”

He tried to lift it from the ground, but Hermione held him down.

Pain. Sharp pain carousing in his body. He hissed a breath and she let his shoulders go. With an air of detachment, she stared at her fingers.

"You're bleeding," she remarked, almost in wonder.

Harry's head was clearing now, the haze was dissolving and the pain was sharpening.

"She hit me in the shoulder and the neck, I think," he said, touching the damp patch on his cloak.

He tried to find her eyes in the mask. "Bellatrix," he started, "did she ... did you?"

"Bellatrix Lestrage is dead," she replied tonelessly. Then she seemed to snap out of it. "How bad is it? Should we use the portkey to Voldemort's mansion or can you go back to Hogwarts?" she asked.

"Go back?"

"Yes, the battle is over. We're retreating," she explained.

Harry pulled himself to a sitting position. "Retreating," he repeated. "Did we lose?"

"Not exactly, but the Minister got away and we are expecting Auror reinforcements to start arriving soon. Actually almost everybody has Apparated away, only the Death Eaters Voldemort left here, to make sure you were unharmed are still here." She pointed towards a group of black-robed figures a short distance away.

Harry looked in that direction, then he held out his good arm and said, "Help me up."

Clenching his teeth, he waited for the moment of light-headedness to pass and holding Hermione's arm stalked to the group in question.

They turned to face him.

"Leave," he said.

The nearest masked wizard inclined his head. "As you order, my lord."

The Death Eaters Dissapparated with a series of soft pops.

He turned back to Hermione, clasping her fingers tightly in his hand.

“Let’s go home.”

When they appeared in the small clearing in the Forbidden Forest, he shivered and lost consciousness for the second time that night.

When Harry next opened his eyes, he was surrounded by crisp white sheets and a heavy red duvet. And someone was calling his name.

Before he had time to gather his senses, the crimson curtains surrounding his four-poster bed were flung open – *oh yes, the dormitory* – and the time-lined face of Professor McGonagall appeared. She was holding her tartan robe closed, so as not to allow the students a glimpse of the old-fashioned white nightshirt she wore beneath.

It’s strange; the details the mind notices, even in a moment of confusion or haste.

Her hair lay in tangled grey locks, protruding from underneath her nightcap. But her eyes were as sharp as ever, and her voice – familiar from the classroom – demanded attention.

Coming running through the common room, up the staircase, she had banged, hard, on the door to the boys’ dormitory. Having alarmed the inhabitants to a female presence, she marched in with a cry of “Potter!” – straight to Harry’s bed.

When she noticed the boy obviously waking from a deep and restful sleep, she calmed down somewhat. While Harry, blinking owlishly at her, fumbled around for his glasses, she said,

“Mr Potter, are you all right?”

Having found his glasses, Harry stifled a yawn. “Fine, Professor.”

“Did you have any nightmares tonight?” she inquired.

“No,” he said, “why do you ask? Did something happen?”

She chose to ignore the question. "Headmaster Dumbledore has asked for your presence in his office."

"Now?"

McGonagall nodded in the affirmative. "I shall give you some privacy to dress yourself; I'll be waiting in the common room to escort you to the Headmaster."

Harry threw his school robes over his pyjamas, wincing, when the rough cloth settled on his bandaged shoulder.

Walking down the stairs, a bout of dizziness hit him, but he managed to overcome it by pausing and breathing deeply. It could have been because of his injury, or due to the fact that Dumbledore had asked for him

*Did he suspect something?*

*'Like a young murderer walking into his office?'* That voice hadn't made an appearance ever since –

*'Ever since you sold your soul away?'*

No.

*'Have you even looked him in the eye after that night?'*

Harry was trembling and weak on his knees, but managed to reach Professor McGonagall without any give-aways.

His Head of House set a brisk pace through the corridors, and Harry trailed behind, striving to catch up and, at the same time, practising the blank expression he was determined to present Dumbledore with.

The Gargoyle retracted, as they neared, to reveal the spiralling staircase.

"In you go," McGonagall said. "Good night, Mr Potter." And disappeared behind a bend in the corridor.

He hesitated briefly, before knocking on the door at the top of the stairs; and entered, taking his time to close the door behind him, before turning around to face the twinkling blue eyes of Professor Dumbledore.

Only they weren't twinkling tonight, and he wasn't alone in his office. Seated in the corner chair was a quite terrified looking Cornelius Fudge, with a glass of amber liquid in a tight grip. Amelia Bones stood at Dumbledore's right hand behind the desk. Wizards and witches Harry did not recognise, were scattered around the room in small groups; he spotted several glasses distributed generously amongst them.

As his gaze travelled around the room, Dumbledore called for his attention.

"Mr Potter," he said, "I've called you here at this unseemly hour, to ask you some questions."

With a flick of his wand a padded chair appeared in front of the headmaster's desk. "Would you please take a seat."

The nervous energy in the room was making Harry's skin tingle and, settling in the chair, he felt very much in the centre of attention.

"Now then, do you feel alright? No headaches tonight? Nightmares?" Dumbledore asked.

Intently studying the Headmaster's white beard, he answered, "No, Professor, nothing."

"Hmm." He leaned back, scratching his beard, and tried to peer into Harry's eyes. "Are you quite certain?"

Harry nodded emphatically.

The slurred voice of Cornelius Fudge intervened, "The boy obviously knows nothing. Send him back to his room and let us continue with our business."

Harry took that as his cue, and stood up to leave the office, only before leaving he wanted to know, “Did something happen, Headmaster? Was someone hurt?”

“Yes, my boy,” Dumbledore answered in a serious tone of voice. “I am afraid that something did, indeed, happen. The Ministry was attacked tonight.”

“Tonight?”

“The Wizengamot was in all-night session to decide on the matter of the Emergency Auror Recruitment Act. Almost everyone of political importance was at the hearing, with a minimal attendance of security personnel. It was slaughter, Harry.”

The green eyes were wide. “But they escaped, didn’t they? The Minister is here and ...”

“Yes, some people escaped, but –“

Cornelius Fudge made a sudden gesture with his glass, and the liquid – *brandy*, Harry thought – came sloshing over the sides, spilling onto his immaculate sleeves. “That is enough, Dumbledore. All this is Ministry business and not to be discussed with *children*.”

Dumbledore waited him out. “As I was saying, some people escaped, but a great many did not. Voldemort has cause to be happy tonight.”

“Is – Is Mr Weasley alright?”

The timeworn face relaxed a little. “Yes, Arthur was at home with his family when the attack took place.”

Some of the tension left Harry’s shoulders; *thank god*.

“Harry I would ask you not to discuss this with your dorm mates just yet. I shall deliver the news at breakfast.”

“Yes, Professor. May I be excused?” Harry was already heading for the door.

“Of course, Mr Potter. Good night.”

The door closed behind him, and Harry made his way back to the Gryffindor Tower.

When he climbed through the portrait hole, Harry glanced at his wristwatch; it was already fifteen to eight, and he felt certain, that soon his dorm mates would come traipsing through the room on their way to breakfast. As he had predicted, merely minutes after he had made himself comfortable on the couch near the fireplace, Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnegan came down the stairs.

“Alright, mate?” Dean asked.

“Yeah, I just don’t feel like having breakfast today.”

One by one students came from their dormitories and left through the portrait hole. Hermione had come down just before eight o’clock and sat next to him on the couch. They waited.

When the traffic finally died down, Harry turned towards her, asking, “What happened?”

“You fainted.”

“I did not faint!” he bristled.

“Fine,” she scoffed, “passed out; the point is you lost consciousness and I had to get you back to your room.”

“Yes, I’d gathered that,” he said. “But how did you do it? I was sure we had been found out, when McGonagall came to my room.”

“Professor McGonagall came to your dorm? What did she want?”

Harry brushed away her hand that had grabbed hold of his robes. “She took me to see Dumbledore, and *he* told me about the attack. But never mind all that; how did you get me back here?”

“Honestly, Harry, are we sixth years or not? I bandaged your wound and transfigured your clothes, then I levitated you to bed.”

“Oh,” was all he could say, as embarrassment flamed his cheeks. Then another thought came. “You said you bandaged the wound. Why didn’t you heal it?”

“Well.” Her brow furrowed. “It seemed to be infected with something and I wasn’t sure how to heal that.”

“*Infected?*” Harry jumped up, and had to sit down again, as dizziness hit him full force.

She nodded. “I was planning to go to the mansion and ask Voldemort whether he knew a counter-curse.”

“Yes,” he said, “do that. Only, go after dark tonight. I think Dumbledore will be keeping a close eye on the students today.”

“I’ll go tonight then.”

Harry felt lulled to sleep as her soft arm closed around him and, leaning against her shoulder, he closed his eyes.

-X-X-X-

In another part of the castle, an old wizard stepped into a fume-filled laboratory.

“Professor Snape,” he called, walking carefully in the narrow pathways between cauldron-laden tables, where colourful glass vials and tubes were emitting a spectrum of smells, and smoky air settled heavily on robes and body alike.

When his eyes located the hook-nosed man, he came to a halt. The Professor ignored him for the time, carefully measuring green liquid from a small bottle and adding it drop by drop to the bubbling cauldron in front of him. He stirred thrice.

The task completed, he turned to face Dumbledore.

“Headmaster,” he intoned his greeting, dark eyes unblinking. “What can I do for you?”



"I remember from your earlier report, you mentioned a new heir. That there are two people important enough to Voldemort to have his Death Eaters protect them in battle."

"The first heir," Snape said, "has been around for some time, but the second ... The Dark Lord has made no mention of her; one day she just appeared at the first one's side. I think she must be more important to him, than to the Dark Lord."

Dumbledore thought for a minute. "A witch? Are you sure?"

"Quite."

"Well, nevertheless, a secret as closely guarded as this must be important. We cannot have it remain a mystery much longer."

Snape turned back to the cauldron, carefully lifting it off the flames.

"I shall go tonight."

## **Chapter 13: Amongst Friends**

Harry dumped his Quidditch gear on the floor and took out some clean clothes from his trunk. The bathroom door had just closed shut behind him, when he heard someone bursting into the sixth year boys' dormitory.

"Harry! I have to –"

He draped the towel around his shoulders and leaned against the door, absentmindedly rubbing the half-healed wound on his shoulder, trying to decide whether he should forego his shower and see what Hermione wanted, or ignore the girl in favour of personal hygiene. He heard the dorm door open once again, and loud footsteps came stomping into the room. Oh, yes – *Ron*, those footsteps were unmistakable. How could one person make the sound of a herd of hippogriffs would? A herd of hippogriffs on a stampede, at that.

Deciding that with the end of Quidditch practice, leaving the bathroom open for invasion was out of the question, Harry stepped away from the door. The last thing he heard was Ron questioning Hermione about her presence.

"Sorry," she said, "I was looking for Harry. I just ran into Professor McGonagall and she said that –"

The rest of her answer was lost in the noise of cascading water.

When Harry walked back into his room some twenty minutes later, the only person there was Ron, who was lying on his bed. He glanced at Harry over the top of the magazine he was reading.

"Done with your shower? Honestly, I don't see why you have to come up here after every practice. Everyone else gets changed in the locker room."

*Everyone else doesn't have a Dark Mark on their arm.* "It's crowded," he answered dismissively.

Ron snorted. "If you say so. Hasn't been a problem before though."

Harry ignored him, and walked over to his own bed. He picked up his Quidditch robes he had carelessly thrown on the floor and placed them inside his trunk. That task complete, he looked over his shoulder.

"What did Hermione want?"

"Hermione?" Ron asked.

"Yes, Hermione." He slumped down on his bed. "I thought I heard her voice just now."

Ron put the Quidditch magazine aside and answered, "Oh, sorry, I forgot." He smiled sheepishly. "She came by to tell you that McGonagall is looking for you. You know," he added, "you should probably step by her office and see what she wants." Without waiting for a response, he grabbed his black school robes off his trunk and put them on, covering his jeans and maroon Weasley jumper. "Do you want me to come with you?"

"You must be bored." Harry smiled. "Or very curious about something."

"Well, it's not every day that McGonagall asks for you, when you haven't actually done anything." He hesitated, before continuing, "You *haven't* broken any rules recently, right?"

"If I had, you'd know about it." *I don't think what I've done is against school rules.*

"Very well," Harry said, while heading for the door. "I'll go and see what she wanted. Are you coming?" he called, one foot already on the stairs.

By the time Harry was knocking on the Transfiguration professor's office door, Ron had caught up with him. He was standing by Harry's side, slightly behind him.

"I think I'd better wait outside," he said suddenly. "After all, she was looking only for you."

As they heard her voice calling for them to enter, Harry grabbed Ron by the elbow and pulled the redhead into the office with him. He leaned over to whisper in his ear, "You wanted to come."

"Mr Potter," McGonagall said, sitting behind her desk, "and Mr Weasley; please, close the door."

Ron nudged the door closed, and the boys stepped into the pristine office. Every single volume on the bookshelf opposite the fireplace was placed in a straight line; every book had its place where it stood. The mantel was uncluttered but for the occasional framed photograph. A young, brown haired witch winked at Ron coquettishly, and he hastily averted his inquisitive eyes. His ears were a warm red, Harry noticed.

McGonagall coughed. "Gentlemen, could I please have your attention."

Ron blushed and snapped to attention; Harry gave his Head of House a shy smile. "Sorry, Professor," he said. "Hermione told us you wanted to see me?"

She placed the parchments she had been grading aside and folded her arms on the desk, absently smearing some of the red ink with the sleeve of her robe. She cleared her throat. "I have known you both since you first came to Hogwarts." McGonagall glanced at Harry. "And one of you even before that. Over the years I have seen you grow into the fine young men I see before me now...."

Both Harry and Ron were listening with growing unease and discomfort. They shared a wild look and Ron mouthed as discreetly as possible, "What's she on about?" Harry shrugged; he had no idea.

"You are nearing the last year of your education at Hogwarts and might already be considered full-grown wizards." She shifted in her seat, as though the last part of that sentence had been particularly hard to say. "Since you are already involved in the recent trouble with He Who Must Not Be Named, the Headmaster..." she paused, reconsidering her choice of words. "We in the Order of the Phoenix think it is time for you to start participating in the Order meetings."

Ron had a disbelieving smile on his face, and slowly, as comprehension dawned, he said, "Brilliant." He turned towards Harry, enthusiastically clapping his back. "We get to see some action, finally."

Harry managed a weak smile in response; the wheels in his head were turning, trying to figure out how to go about actively fighting for both side. The only real option he could see was to leave Hogwarts for good: it was finally time to declare his allegiances. Only, Harry wasn't completely sure he wanted to do that, leave all his friends behind; he would even miss the schoolwork.

McGonagall interrupted his musings by answering Ron's comment. "Mr Weasley," she said, "you are allowed to observe Order meetings to keep up to date regarding recent events. Neither of you are going to be doing any fighting, not if I have anything to say about it. And, Mr Weasley, I daresay your mother will not let you out of her sight."

Harry suddenly found himself able to smile again. The terrified look Ron got in his eyes at the mention of his mother; and he had other reasons, too. He addressed McGonagall, "Professor, was that all?"

"Well, the Headmaster has asked me to inform you that you are welcome to sit in on your first Order meeting tonight at nine o'clock."

Ron was smiling and nodding eagerly, while Harry asked one more question, "When you say 'you', do you mean all three of us?"

"Yes, Mr Potter. Ms Granger has been invited to join you." She pushed her glasses up her nose and pulled the stack of parchments a little closer. "I shall collect you at the portrait hole at fifteen minutes to nine. Good day, gentlemen." She picked up her quill and dipped into a large bottle of red ink.

The boys hastily retreated and, on their way back to the Gryffindor common room, Ron could not stop talking about everything they could do now they were in the Order. He was really excited, Harry noted, and if this had happened some time in the autumn he would have been too.

As they climbed through the Portrait Hole, they noticed Hermione sitting in an armchair by the fire, in her usual spot. Without waiting for Harry, Ron ran up to her and sat down next to her. He was positively glowing with the news. Hermione carefully put down the book she had been reading, making sure to place a marker where she had left off. Then she turned to face the redhead. "Yes, Ron? What is it?"

"We're going to an Order meeting!" he whispered, leaning closer.

Hermione looked over his shoulder, a questioning eyebrow raised. "We are?" she asked Harry.

He nodded and lifted a hand to run his fingers through his hair, rumpling it a little more.

"When?"

"Tonight at nine." Ron couldn't control his excitement and jumped up to start pacing back and forth in front of the seated girl. "McGonagall is meeting us here, and then taking us to the meeting. Imagine, *everybody* is going to be there." He leaned restlessly against the side of her chair, continuing, "All the Aurors who are loyal to Dumbledore and ... my brothers and ... *we'll* be there. We get to be a part of everything. Ginny is going to be so jealous, and Fred and George! I can just see the look on their faces." He smiled dreamily. "I get to be in the Order while still at school."

Hermione picked up her discarded book and used it to tap Ron on the arm. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

His brow furrowed and he looked at Hermione, completely clueless. "Huh?"

"You *are* still at school, and you have homework to do." She waved the textbook she had been reading in front of his nose – *Blood Brothers: My Life Amongst the Vampires*. "Remember, we have an essay due tomorrow, and if you want to be at Order meeting tonight, you'd better start writing. Professor Saims isn't going excuse you just because you were *saving the world*."

Ron's face fell. "Bloody hell! I completely forgot. Couldn't I see yours? For inspiration –"

"Ronald Weasley, you have to do your own work. Besides, you need your own dark creature, you can't do the same as mine," she admonished.

"Well," he scratched his head, "do you think Professor Lupin would mind if I picked werewolves? Harry?" He tried to catch the attention of his friend, who had been listening to the bickering between his fellow Gryffindors with an amused little smile.

"Oh. No, I don't think he'd mind. However, I already did mine on werewolves. Sorry, Ron," Harry said, shrugging.

The redhead sighed. "You've finished it too, then?"

Harry gave an apologetic nod and sat down on the couch near Hermione's chair.

Ron straightened and started to walk towards the boys' staircase in a reluctantly slow pace, hands in the pockets of his robes.

"Well, I guess I'd better start on my essay ..." He turned his head to look remorsefully at the cosy fire. "If neither of you will help me."

A red and gold pillow hit the side of his face. "Oh, get off it Ron! Go do your own homework," Harry said, grabbing another pillow and brandishing it in a mocking threat.

Ron snorted and disappeared up the stairs in a flash of black robes and carrot hair.

As soon as they heard the click of a door upstairs, Harry let the pillow drop and, wincing, rubbed his arm just below the shoulder. Hermione saw the look on his face and abandoned her chair for the time being, sitting closer to Harry and almost whispering in his ear, "Is your shoulder still bothering you?"

"No, not really."

Hermione sneaked a look around, to see if anybody was trying to follow their conversation, but the common room was half-empty and those present were caught up in their own activities. Still, she whispered carefully, "The Dark Lord assured me that this is the best potion and should heal your wound quickly. But it's only been a couple of days, so might not be working properly yet."

"No, it's working all right," Harry assured her in the same quiet tone of voice. "Even the scar is fading; soon there won't be a mark left. I just think I might have sprained something today at Quidditch practise."

"Oh." Hermione pulled away a little. "Boys and their games. You were seriously hurt just recently, and you go play in a sport, where it's common practice to hit your fellow players with heavy iron balls, hurled at great speeds. Honestly."

"It's not like I could have missed practice. I am the captain, and people would have got really suspicious if I hadn't played."

"You could have said you weren't feeling well." She sat up straighter and tilted her nose just a tiny bit upwards.

"With a major attack by Voldemort a few days ago? An attack I did not have a vision of, and only just heard about from Dumbledore? What do you think would have happened, if I had claimed any sort of trivial illness to get out of practice? Everyone knows how much I love Quidditch and that only something really important could stop me from playing. I would have been sent straight to Madam Pomfrey. With a half-healed wound of unexplainable dark origin on my shoulder, I might add. That would have led straight to a *conversation* with Dumbledore. And where would we be then?" He raised an eyebrow. "It's a lot better to risk a mild sprain than that, wouldn't you agree?"

Hermione had the decency to blush, but her shoulders didn't slump, and she *accioed* her book bag. She then proceeded to dig out two large leather-bound volumes. "Well," she said, "seeing as we still have half an hour before Professor McGonagall comes to collect us, we might as well get in some extra studying." She steadily refused to look Harry in the eye while placing the book in his outstretched hand.



As she leaned forward, a small golden star slipped out of the collar of her school blouse, tangling between the opened folds of her black robes that absorbed the small sparks of light the medallion cast around. She jumped a little as his hand closed around the glittering object; Harry opened his palm and looked at it quietly for a moment, his nose wrinkled in thought.

Then his questioning green eyes met hers. "You still have it. Why?" he asked. "Is it because *he* gave it to you? Remember, you are marked mine, you do not have his attention. That is mine and mine alone. I am his heir," he hissed softly, bleakness in his eyes. A darkness, residing deep in his soul.

Hermione suppressed a shiver as a sudden cold blew through the room. She shook her head rapidly. Something flickered in Harry's eyes and they returned to the familiar deep green, amusement and laughter shining through them.

He smiled and let go of the star. "I never thought you the jewellery type. Surrounding yourself with pretty trinkets?"

"Harry," she scoffed. "This is not a trinket. Don't you remember? It's a portkey created by V – You Know Who himself."

"Yes, yes. Of course, I remember. He gave me one just like it, you know." He continued, "They were emergency portkeys, however. For the battle. I don't see why you'd still have yours."

Hermione levelled him with a disbelieving stare. "Harry, they are portkeys to," she leaned closer and hissed in his ear, "Voldemort. They will take the user to him. You cannot leave things like that just lying around." With that, she stood up and tucked the medallion under her blouse.

The timing was perfect as, simultaneously, Ron came clambering down the stairs and the portrait hole opened to reveal the strict form of Professor Minerva McGonagall.

She observed her students for a moment. "Come," she said, and swept away, leaving the entrance to the Gryffindor Tower empty once again.

The trio climbed out and met her in the corridor.

"The meeting is about to start. Please follow me," she said, and started walking down the seventh floor corridor.

Hermione quickened her steps to catch up with her. She asked, "Professor, where are we going?"

"I do believe you are familiar with the place," said McGonagall, coming to a stop next to the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy. She walked back and forth a couple of times and a door appeared in the opposite wall.

"Oh, of course," Hermione mumbled under her breath, "the Room of Requirement. What better place for an Order meeting."

The young Gryffindors trailed in after her. The room was already filled with people; sitting on chairs, chatting in small groups. Harry spotted several familiar faces; he waved to a purple-haired Tonks, who knocked over a small table in her enthusiastic swirl to wave back. An easily recognisable cluster of redheads was milling around a couch at the far side of the room. As the people noticed the teenagers, the medley of voices slowly quieted.

Mad Eye Moody cast an approving look in their direction, his wand hand clutching the thin air spasmodically. Tiny Professor Flitwick offered a happy smile in the general vicinity of Hermione, and Molly Weasley ... Molly Weasley just went white in the face. Her eyes were firmly fixed on the nervous face of her youngest son, and she was clutching her husband's arm tightly. Slowly, she started to show the characteristics of a hot air balloon; she was drawing air in, breath by breath, red splotches of colour appearing on her face. The entire room of people had silenced and they were now watching the happenings with morbid curiosity. Like a model car being run over by a great big steam engine.

"Ronald Bilius Weasley! What do you think you are doing here?"

Ron flinched.

The soothing voice of Albus Dumbledore came from behind him, echoing in the void left by Molly Weasley's outcry, "Now, Molly, young Mr Weasley is here at my express permission. I have asked these youngsters to sit in on the Order meetings. I think it is time, don't you?"

"But – but –" she spluttered, "they're *children*. My children."

Dumbledore rested his hand on Ron's back. "I do believe that Mr Weasley and Ms Granger are of age, and Mr Potter is ward of the school while staying here. He has my permission to participate in the meeting."

Mrs Weasley stared at Dumbledore open-mouthed, gaping like a fish while Mr Weasley tried to pull her down to sit next to him in the gaggle of assorted Weasley children. She gave in to the pressure and sat down heavily, still glaring daggers at her youngest boy. Ron gulped and nervously shifted closer to Hermione, as though certain that the protection of such a formidable young witch could spare him from the wrath of Mother.

Harry sat in an empty chair next to the wall while Hermione and Ron sat together on a small couch as far away from the other Weasleys as possible.

Dumbledore called the meeting to order. "We have something very important to discuss tonight," he said. "As some of you know, Voldemort has been rapidly gaining in strength. Not only that, he has carried out a successful attack against the Ministry of Magic itself. The most recent development though, is the most distressing. It has now been confirmed that Voldemort has named an heir." Quiet murmurs travelled across the room as the inhabitants nodded their acknowledgement of this piece of news.

"This is grave news for the side of Light." He paused for a moment. "It has also been brought to my attention that said heir has a partner. We now have a couple, willing to carry out Voldemort's plans and advance them should anything happen to him.

"Due to this news, I have made it a priority to discover the identities of these new Death Eaters. I am certain that you agree with me; it is

imperative for us to stamp out these weeds of evil, before they have time to spread. We cannot allow for a situation where every dark lord defeated reveals a new one, trained and ready to take his place ...”

Hermione was looking intently at Dumbledore, apparently in deep concentration, but Harry’s mind was blank. Just blank. He listened to Dumbledore’s speech but he didn’t hear it. Somewhere deep inside a voice was hissing contemptuously, ‘*You missed it, didn’t you. You weren’t as clever as you thought. Neither of you. Too arrogant; so sure of your invincibility. You forgot.*’ He shook himself; Dumbledore was still speaking.

“... agreed to give us his report. Severus?”

The dark-robed wizard stepped out of the corner he had been standing in and turned to address the gathering. His robes were moving dramatically around his body and his dispassionate face seemed almost animated as he started speaking in a cold, drawling voice.

“Headmaster Dumbledore asked me, exactly three days ago, to concentrate all my efforts on finding out the identities of the heirs. I left that very evening for the Dark Lord’s mansion.”

The wizard was not a natural storyteller; nevertheless, he had a rapt audience.

“As luck would have it, the Dark Lord was sorely in need of a complicated potion. He never questioned my presence and ordered me to retreat to the basement laboratories to immediately start work on a healing potion. I was to deliver it to the Lord personally, once I was finished.”

Snape started to walk slowly around the room, occasionally stopping near some people, talking as he moved, “I brewed the potion and took it to his audience chamber. He told me to leave and I did ... but ... I did not leave the mansion. I stood *disillusioned* near the entrance to this room. I stood, and I waited.” He smiled almost predatorily while stopping near Mad Eye’s chair.

“I waited ... I did not have to wait long.” He was walking around the room again. “A woman in a heavy, hooded robe came down the corridor. She was wearing the white mask of a Death Eater, but her walk was entirely too confident for someone about to approach their Master ...”

The tall, pale wizard was roaming amongst the various groups sitting in the room.

“She lifted her hand to knock, and her hood fell.”

Hermione was sitting comfortably next to Ron on the couch. Harry was leaning forward intently. Snape had stopped behind Ron.

“I can never mistake that hair for another’s,” he whispered softly to the silent room.

His hand landed on a head full of brown curls.

The entire room seemed to collectively intake a breath. Ron was turning to face Hermione; he reached out with his hand. She was clutching her chest. Albus Dumbledore had his wand out. Snape’s hypnotising voice was intoning a word.

*“Expellia –“*

Ron’s hand had grabbed hold of her arm. And Harry saw a small golden star hanging between the folds of her black robes.

As the spell resounded in the air, an empty couch stood innocently in the middle of the Room of Requirement.

## **Chapter 14: And in the End**

It seemed almost unnatural, how quiet the corridor was after the pandemonium in the meeting room, and Harry rested his back against the wall, taking a deep breath. His fingers were curling compulsively around the smooth shaft of the wand in his right pocket. A sheen of moisture glistened on his forehead. Slowly, his legs relaxed and he slumped down to sit with his eyes closed, his head resting on his knees.

The silence was broken as the door he had banged shut behind him opened. The tall frame of Albus Dumbledore stood in the doorway and angered voices of a heated argument reached Harry's ears.

"Harry," he said. "Please, come back inside. There is a lot to be discussed."

Harry raised his tired eyelids and met the Headmaster's unwavering gaze. He almost smiled; even amidst all the chaos, the blue was still twinkling.

As though Dumbledore were able to read his mind once more, he said, "Even in these troubling times we're facing, there is still hope, my boy."

"Come now, we must decide on a course of action." With that, he vanished back into the bright light and noise of the Room of Requirement.

Harry grimaced and forced himself to relax every muscle in his body; he was about to give the performance of a lifetime. He walked back into the room, and it quieted almost immediately. He felt tens of pairs of eyes on him as he calmly walked to his chair and sat down.

Molly Weasley grabbed the chance, and declared loudly, "My Ron is not involved in this. None of my children would ever betray our side." She held herself up straight, with her husband's arm around her waist and the tall shapes of her children looming over her shoulder. Everything in her posture screamed that if you even dared to say something negative about one of her offspring, there would be hell to pay.

Mad Eye mumbled under his nose, "You heard the man, two heirs. *Two*. And one of them identified. Who disappeared from the room, huh? Not a traitor my bloody eye. Mongrels like that should be Avada'd on the spot."

Mrs Weasley's ears were turning red, and her eyes shooting off sparks as she opened her mouth.

However, before the shouting match could resume, Dumbledore intervened by stepping calmly to the middle of the room. He smiled at the Weasleys and said, "I am sure there is a logical explanation for everything. Isn't that right, Severus?"

Professor Snape, who had faded into the background like a dark shadow said, "I have not managed to discover the identity of the Dark Lord's heir, but I must confirm the fact that it was indeed Ms Granger who I saw entering his chamber. I am positive that she is one of the heirs. As to the male, there is no confirmed information."

Molly Weasley raised an eyebrow and smiled triumphantly at Mad Eye Moody.

"Although," Snape continued, and the smile left her face, "it stands to reason that seeing as young Ms Granger is a Mu – *Muggleborn*, the true heir would be someone who cares for her, and is a pureblood himself. It is very unlikely that the Dark Lord would name his heir from *impure* stock..." he trailed off, and looked around, smirking suggestively.

The Weasley twins were looking ready to hex him to his deathbed, and the older brothers had to grab hold of their wand arms to keep them from doing something they'd regret later. It was obvious though, that one more provocation, and the entire Weasley clan would join forces against the Death Eater spy.

"Enough," Dumbledore said quietly, and the divisions in the room fell back to their seats, looking expectantly at the old wizard.

"We must not jump to conclusions; it is likely that Ms Granger has joined Voldemort for reasons unknown to us. However, as Professor Snape has said, there is no proof of treason with Mr Weasley. Right

now we should determine what it is that happened, and decide what to do next.” He turned to Harry and said in a much softer tone of voice, “Harry, my boy, do you think you can shed some light on the situation?”

As every person in the room turned to look at him, Harry forced himself to relax, even though the question made panic course through his veins. He swallowed nervously and met the headmaster’s eyes. “Um, what do you mean?”

“Have you noticed anything different about your friends recently?”

“Oh,” he breathed. “No, there’s nothing. Ron and Hermione have been, well, Ron and Hermione.” Harry’s brow furrowed as he dared a look around the room. “You don’t think ... You don’t think that Snape is actually telling the truth?” He was shaking his head as he spoke.

Dumbledore smiled a little and stepped closer, and sat down next to Harry. “I’m afraid it is a very real possibility we must take into consideration. Because of that, we must have every possible piece of information. Do you understand what I’m asking, Harry?”

The dark-haired young man nodded, and offered, “You’re asking whether I think that Ron and Hermione have joined the D – Voldemort?” He glanced around to see if anybody had noticed his almost slip. He was met by steady, inquiring or reassuring looks. Except ... Snape was studying him carefully with an unreadable expression on his sallow face.

His eyes flickered back to Dumbledore. “I – I had a fight with Ron in the autumn. We haven’t talked much this year because of that. I just really don’t know. I’m sorry, I just don’t know!” he shouted. “I don’t know ...” His voice was so quiet now that even in the silent room, it was almost inaudible.

Arthur Weasley was the one to break the silence. “What are we going to do to save my son?”

“Save him?” Moody barked. “He’s made his bed with the dogs; I say we leave him to lie in it.” He sat back down in his seat with a loud thump.



Molly Weasley broke free of her children's hold, and her wand hovered in front of Mad Eye's nose before anyone else could react to the retired Auror's callous statement. "This is my Ronald we're talking about. He is not a traitor! How dare you!"

Her husband stepped forward and his fingers closed calmly around her shaking hand. He applied gentle pressure and slowly, she lowered her wand, still glaring fiercely at Moody.

"Arthur is right," came a surprising statement that brought the entire room's attention back to Snape. He stepped forth from the shadows near the walls and continued, "We must find a way to retrieve young Mr Weasley."

The matriarch of said family graced him with a disbelieving yet relieved smile.

The Potions Professor didn't seem to notice and continued, "It doesn't matter whether he's innocent of the crime or not. If his, indeed, innocent it is our duty to return him to safety. If he's not ..." he hesitated. "He is a very dangerous individual; I know parts of what the heir has done in the service of the Dark Lord and I can guess the rest. However, if the heir is Weasley, there might be a possibility to extract important information from him. With his family connections, he would be much easier to influence into giving us a weapon against Lord Voldemort.

"If that fails, he is a weapon against the Dark Lord himself we could use." Snape had caught the attention of the gathering with his little speech, and some of the people were already nodding along in agreement.

"What about Hermione?" The quiet question from Harry interrupted him, and Snape swirled to face him.

With a cold smile he hissed, "*She is irrelevant.*"

Dumbledore intervened, "She is a student here, Severus. Whatever we know, or think we know about her, we *are* responsible for her safety."

“When we go to retrieve Mr Weasley, I don’t see why we cannot bring her along. If that is what you wish.” Snape quirked an eyebrow and looked at Dumbledore.

“This is all well and good, but how to you propose we go about *retrieving* the children?” Amelia Bones stepped forth.

“I believe that Severus is suggesting that we implement the plan we have been working on,” Dumbledore answered her.

“*The Plan?*” She was wide-eyed. “We don’t have enough people for that yet. Albus, you know that.”

Snape cleared his throat. “If I may, Madam Bones, I have the location of the mansion pinpointed down to the Western coast of Scotland. I think we have enough people to cover the area?”

She looked at him in surprise. “I didn’t know that.” Glaring at Dumbledore she repeated, “I did not know that.”

“A recent development, I’m sure.” Dumbledore twinkled in response.

“Hm, yes, quite recent.” Snape took the cue. “I believe we have enough Order members to cover the coast from air. As I Apparate to the Dark Lord’s mansion, I shall send up green sparks. Someone should be able to spot them –”

“We’ll get our brooms!” the Weasley twins shouted in unison, and ran from the room just in time to escape another outburst from their mother.

“It seems we have decided, then.” At the confirming nods from the people in the room, Dumbledore continued, “Severus, give us half an hour to get in position. Then you may Apparate to Voldemort.”

The spy inclined his head, and in a billowing swirl of black robes, left the meeting room.

Harry stood and walked up to Headmaster Dumbledore. “Sir, can I help?”

“Aah, Harry. I think you should return to your dormitory.”

“But, Professor —“

“Harry.” He looked seriously at the boy. “Leave us to take care of this.”

His eyes were downcast to hide the growing panic, and he said, “Yes, Headmaster.” Then Harry walked out of the Room of Requirement, walked faster through the corridors, turned a bend and ran. He ran up to the portrait hole, through the common room and up the stairs.

Not caring if he woke the sleeping boys, he tore open his trunk and dug out the white mask and black cloak that marked him Lord Voldemort’s heir. He bundled them up and grabbed his Firebolt; opening the window, he mounted the broom and flew out of the castle.

After landing in the clearing in the Forbidden Forest, he donned his Death Eater attire and Apparated.

The manor was dark. It stood tall and looming in the middle of the surrounding trees; the gaping opening of the main doors was tantalisingly inviting. So dark, you just knew it would swallow you whole, yet find yourself incapable of walking away.

Harry had no intention of running away; he walked as fast as he could to the mansion, in the doors. The cold breath of late night air following him, and extinguishing some of the torches that flickered on the walls of the corridor. He moved without hesitation; there was no doubt in his mind where his best friend would end up in enemy territory. His memory was good; he remembered where he had found Hermione on that fateful night.

He passed the niche Malfoy had pulled him into; he could already see the familiar cell door. Already he could hear voices, coming from somewhere before him. The sense of déjà vu was overwhelming. A voice whispered in his head, *‘Perhaps it will work out the same way. We’ll be together. All of us, again.’*

He stopped in from of the heavy door. It was opened just a crack and with the voices, a beam of light filtered out into the corridor. It formed

a bright line in front of his feet he was hesitant to cross; for he knew that then he would be visible from the cell. So he stood, listening.

"You have to listen to me, Ron." Harry could detect the note of desperation in Hermione's voice. "This is not what you think."

"Not what I *think*? Enlighten me then, please." There were footsteps stomping around the room. "As I see it, you have betrayed our side, you have betrayed everyone, you've betrayed me and Harry. Merlin ... you've betrayed *Harry*. You're supposed to be his best friend, you know what he has gone through because of Voldemort. You know what he has lost, and still you go to that bastard."

"Ron –"

"Don't 'Ron' me! You have no right. I don't know who you even are anymore. Were you ever our friend? How long have you been spying on us for *him*? Were you laughing when Harry was tortured last year by those visions?"

Harry heard a shuffle and then a thump as though someone had fallen to the ground. "Don't touch me!" Ron yelled. "Don't you dare to touch me."

Harry raised his hand to open the door and walk in, when he heard Hermione say quietly, "*Petrificus totalus*." He stopped.

"Ron, you are going to listen to me." Harry peeked through the opening between the doorframe and the door. She was crouching over Ron's immobile body, fingering her wand nervously. "This really isn't what you think. Harry –"

He pulled up the hood of his cloak and checked if his mask was in place. Then he stepped into the room, interrupting Hermione from whatever she was about to say.

As she turned around to face him, he saw her mouth open. Almost in slow motion, the word came out. "*Harry!*"

He flinched; sometimes, Hermione really wasn't too smart.

Glancing at Ron, he saw confusion in his blue eyes. The redhead was carefully studying the mask on his face, as though hoping to see beneath it by sheer force of will.

Hermione jumped up and hugged him. "What are you doing here?"

As her arms closed around him, he could see a dawning understanding flicker in Ron's eyes. He could not move, but he was struggling to mouth a word. He didn't succeed, but Harry could guess what he was trying to ask.

Harry let go of Hermione and stood over the body of his long time friend. "*Finite incantatem*," he said.

"*Harry ...*"

He levelled his wand at Ron. "I'm so sorry," he said, and a tear trickled down Ron's cheek as the boy stared at the white-masked face of his friend. He sat up, and glared at Harry.

"I'm so sorry," the young wizard repeated, and opened his mouth once more. Then he closed his eyes and breathed in heavily, shaking his head once. Suddenly he smiled just a little, and said, "*Obliviate*."

When Ron slumped on the floor, unconscious, he grabbed Hermione's hand and pulled her from the cell. As the door closed with an echoing metallic thump, Hermione asked, "Why did you do that? We could have explained ... maybe even –"

He raised his finger to her lips. "Shush, there's no time; the Order is coming."

Her eyes widened.

"You shouldn't have taken Ron; they are determined to get here now."

"No, I –" She shook her head frantically. "I – it was an accident. He grabbed hold of me."

“Never mind now.” Harry was already running down the corridor. “We have to find Lord Voldemort, we have to warn him.”

Hermione took off after him.

As they climbed the stairs and entered the ground floor hallway, Harry heard shouting from all around. There were screams, spells bouncing off the walls, the mansion was alive with the sounds of fighting.

They were too late; the Order of the Phoenix had arrived, and the Final Battle had started.

A blue robed Auror fired a spell in their direction as they dashed through the corridors, towards Voldemort’s audience chamber. The door had been blasted off the hinges and it was filled with smoke, and the bright flashes of spells. Harry pulled Hermione in and surged forward in an attempt to reach the Dark Lord who was surrounded by a circle of Death Eaters.

They were almost unnoticeable in the middle of all the chaos, but some of the black robed figures seemed to recognise their master’s heirs approaching and created an opening for him and Hermione to pass through in Lord Voldemort’s line of defence.

The Order was getting desperate and several people, some whom Harry knew, threw themselves headfirst at the Death Eaters creating diversions to allow their companions to get nearer to Voldemort. As Harry looked frantically around, he saw Mad Eye Moody nearing from the side, gracefully slipping through the cracks in the defence. The old Auror had a possessed gleam in his eyes, and as Harry followed his line of vision, he saw that he was heading straight for Voldemort.

He raised his voice in warning, but the noise in the room muffled any attempt.

He aimed his wand at Moody, but there were too many people in the way. Suddenly, he felt a feather light kiss on the side of his head and saw a girl with tangled brown hair running. It was a race between her and the Auror.

Frozen to the spot, he touched the tingling spot on his head with the tip of his fingers, and Moody aimed his wand at Voldemort and voiced the Killing Curse.

Harry heard his Master's voice, speaking in this same room on that day, long passed.

*Neither can live while the other does not...*

She ran, and she jumped. The green light hit her in the centre of her chest and she crumbled to the ground, broken.

"No," he said quietly.

"No," he repeated and ran uncaringly through the people surrounding Voldemort. "No!" he screamed as he pulled the dagger from the folds of his robes and plunged it into the heart of evil.

He smiled when blood burst from the lipless mouth of Lord Voldemort. He smiled when the red slits of his eyes widened. He smiled when the wizard who had taken everything from him fell to the ground.

His face held no emotion as he removed his mask and his cloak, and sat down next to Hermione's body, cradling her head on his lap.

He sat, unmoving, as the fighting died down when the Death Eaters realised their master was gone.

And, at last, when he felt not a movement around him, he stood, carefully picked up Hermione's body, running his fingers through her hair, and walked out the door. A broken soul in a casing of steel. The flames of darkness had consumed all there had been and left a statue with emotions wrenched out.

He walked outside, carrying his burden, and would have kept on walking if Dumbledore together with some Order members hadn't blocked his way.

"Harry," the old wizard said.

The desperate young man turned his face towards Dumbledore. It was grimy with sweat and soot.

"Is this my reward?" Harry asked him calmly. "Is this my punishment ..." he added in a quiet breath to himself. He laid down her body on a clean patch of grass on the muddy ground of the battlefield and walked to Dumbledore. The Order members crowded closer, as not to miss anything that was going to be said.

But Dumbledore ... Dumbledore backed away ever so slightly; he saw the madness and the grief in the young mans eyes and the greatest wizard of his time was scared. Scared of the blank desperation in his student's eyes.

Harry stepped closer. His voice was rising. "Is this what I get? I do my 'job'; I fulfil your damn prophecy ... I save the goddamn world!" The stony bleakness of his face was that of walking death and the voice – Merlin, that voice – it sounded so ancient and so indescribably sad.

"Have you any idea, Dumbledore? Any idea ..." a coarse whisper, "what I've had to do, what I've done. What I chose to do? I brought *your* peace, to your world!"

Alastor Moody chose that moment to step in. "Now, see here, boy, it isn't your place to speak to the headmaster like that."

Harry paled and turned to face the old Auror, in an instant his wand was in the older man's face. He gritted through clenched teeth, "Not my place ... *Not my place?* You! You have no right to speak to me. Not after what you've done tonight. You should be thankful that I don't kill you on the spot." Harry lowered his wand and walked back to the resting form of the woman on the ground. He sat down next to her and took the white hand in his. The clearing was quiet for a moment. And then his empty voice spoke again. This time to the entire Order, or what was left of it.

"She is dead. She was my reason ... for everything she was my reason." He was speaking quietly, almost as if only to himself, but in the quiet of the night everyone heard the words. "I gave all; I sacrificed all that was mine to give, for this cause. I let it take my conscience; I offered it my soul. And at last I surrendered ... and still



you won. You got what you wanted. And then you..." Harry looked up at the men and women surrounding him. "You had to take my heart."

The group of people stood together and watched the grieving young man and the body of the woman that had brought so much pain into his voice. A solitary moonbeam lit her face and the ragged robe she was wearing. Her left arm was exposed and there, a black blemish, the Mark of her sin for all the world to see. The Order members saw this constant reminder and could not understand the depth of his grief.

Then, Dumbledore, in a rare moment of complete stupidity, said, "Let it go, Harry. She isn't worth it. Ms Granger was a Death Eater, a killer and a traitor to the Light."

No one was prepared for it. The loud, crazy laughter suddenly filling the air around them. Through the maddening cackle, Harry shouted, "A Death Eater? Yes, she was, wasn't she? A killer too, a torturer perhaps as well ... she was everything this war made her to be!" His gaze was locked on Dumbledore. "She was what I made her to be..." Harry's voice softened. "She never betrayed me ... she was my heart." He closed his eyes and held tighter to her unmoving hand. "She was my best friend, she was my love."

Dumbledore saw the broken man on the ground in front of him, and suddenly something snapped. A dawning understanding in his eyes he whispered, "No – by Merlin – no."

The nearest person to him, Kingsley Shacklebolt, caught the silent denial and raised a questioning eyebrow at him. "What?"

By now, Dumbledore had the attention of the entire Order as looks swapped between him and Harry. Dumbledore ignored them and, staring blindly at Harry, said, "It can't be..." Upon seeing the dark smile on the face of the younger man observing him, he continued his trail of thought out loud. "The rumours ... Voldemort's two new lieutenants ... his heirs ... the ones whose identities were kept such a secret – a man and a woman. Professor Snape identified the woman as Hermione Granger, but we never learned who the man was..."

Dumbledore seemed unable to continue and the Order members were buzzing in confusion ... that is until –

Harry smiled so peacefully, looking at Dumbledore when, letting Hermione's hand drop, he took hold of his left sleeve and slowly, bit by bit, rolled it up. Every person close by held their breath. On the pale flesh of the Wizarding world's greatest hero stood the mark of its greatest evil. Burning black on his left forearm was the Dark Mark.

Professor Dumbledore closed his eyes to stop the tears from coming; his shoulders sagged. And the most powerful man in the Wizarding world seemed to age to his years in an eye blink. His lips moved. "Why?"

"At first to win. To win at every cost. To win for her. For her ..." He was unable to continue as the dryness in his throat made his voice die.

Harry Potter turned back to his love and shut every single person surrounding them out. His eyes were clear cold stones in a pale face. He made not a sound. He wished he could cry as he had once, when had thought he would lose her. When her embrace had brought the tears. He wanted to cry; he had forgotten how.

He never noticed the wizards and witches walking away. Leaving him and Hermione alone in the looming shadow of the dark mansion – unmoving silhouettes in the starlight.

## Epilogue

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*Five years after the Final Battle of the Second War*

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A young man was walking through the ancient corridors of Hogwarts Castle. It was the second of September, and he had just finished his final lesson of the day. He was just passing a slightly opened classroom door, when he heard a name ... *his* name. The man came to a stop and stepped closer to the door to listen.

It was a first year class of History of Magic, taught by Professor Weasley after the Professor Bins had finally gone on permanent retirement and vanished from existence a few years ago. One of the little children had asked a question. *Merlin, were we so young once?* And the excited clatter of the classroom had quieted after –

“Professor ... is it true that you know Harry Potter?”

He smiled silently. *See, how you answer that, Ginny.* And leaned closer to hear the answer.

“Yes, Ms Beech, Harry is a very good friend of mine.” Her voice carried through the classroom and the open door, strong and confident.

“Professor, could you tell us about him? And Voldemort? How he defeated Voldemort in the War.”

His breath caught as he peered through the opening in the door to see Ginny motion the young children closer to her. As the first years huddled around her, she began.

“Well, children. Not so long ago there was an evil wizard, who terrorised the entire country, Muggles and wizards alike. He was very, very evil, but so powerful that nobody could stop him. Until one day a little boy, barely a year old, survived the Killing Curse, banishing Voldemort into the Ghost Realm for thirteen years ... And then he

returned to living form. It was up to the Boy Who Lived to stop him again..." She smiled, immersed in the 'fairy-tale' she was telling.

"How did he do it, Professor?" a child interrupted, caught up in the story.

She continued, "You know that Professor Dumbledore and his Order of the Phoenix had a spy among the Death Eaters, right?"

An affirmative noise could be heard.

"That spy let Harry know that Voldemort had captured his best friend, Ron, and so Harry took off to rescue him. And with him went his other best friend – Hermione. They Apparated right to Voldemort's headquarters, where Ron was kept prisoner ... and freed him. By that time the Order of the Phoenix together with our headmaster Albus Dumbledore had arrived. A great battle ensued. Harry duelled with Voldemort, but the wands locked and neither could win. But then, Hermione saw what was happening and attacked Voldemort from the side ... giving time for Harry to get close enough to kill Voldemort. After the evil wizard was defeated, Harry turned to his friend, only to realise the distraction she had provided for Harry had killed her..."

Ginny's voice was quiet now, as was the rest of the class.

Then a girl in the first row spoke, "My Mum says she was a great hero."

"She was, Ms Lee, she was..." she answered with a sad smile.

The same smile was on the lips of the young man as he walked on, towards his quarters in the teacher's wing, Dumbledore's words from that fateful night echoing in his mind, "*The winners write the history, my boy, and the people choose their heroes.*"

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*Seven years after the Final Battle*

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A slender young man, wrapped in a heavy black cloak, sat in the private room of the Hog's Head. "Enter," he said, as someone knocked on the door. A scarred wizard wearing nondescript dark robes walked inside and carefully shut the door behind him.

The young man pulled out his wand and warded the room against possible eavesdropping. He placed his holly wand back inside his robes, and motioned for the other wizard to sit. "Well, what news do you have for me, my child?"

"Everything is in place, my Lord."

The young wizard smiled, incredible cruelty distorting his handsome face for a fleeting moment. Then he relaxed. "Good. You may leave me now."

The man scrambled to his feet and headed for the door; however, before exiting, he turned and asked, "When will it happen?"

"Patience," the young wizard said softly, "our time will come."

The door closed behind the scarred wizard. A large white snake slithered out from underneath the table, and wrapped herself around the wizard's arm. He blew a lock of black hair from his eyes and, petting the snake, hissed, "Our time will come."

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### *Nine years after the Final Battle*

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Breakfast at the Great Hall had always been a lively time. This morning was no different as the four tables hummed with conversation, the teacher's table not far behind in volume as the young Professor of History continued her ongoing teasing of the grumpy old Potions Master.

Then the windows opened as carrier owls soared into the Hall, dropping letters, packages and an occasional Howler in front of the students. Suddenly, a loud cheering emitted from the Gryffindor table.

Ginny glanced over and saw that two thirds of her Gryffindors had gathered around a young boy with an opened newspaper in front of him.

She picked up her own *Daily Prophet* her grey owl had deposited into her bowl of porridge. There, on the front page, was the article that had brought such a loud exclamation of joy from her students, and even she could not help but smile.

***Harry Potter, the Man Who Won, was elected Minister for Magic in a landslide victory this morning***

*Mr Potter, who is best known for his double defeat of the Dark Lord Voldemort, and dubbed the Man Who Won for ensuring the safety of the Wizarding world, announced his surprise candidacy for the position of Minister only recently. Since his victory over Voldemort, he has worked as a Professor of Defence Against the Dark Arts in Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, even doing a stint as the Gryffindor Head of House. This spring, however, one of the most loved Professors in the school retired from his position and entered the political arena. Not surprisingly, he has gathered a large support base, promising extensive reforms for the still war damaged country...*

**The End**

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**A/N:** Nothing can describe how it feels to write the words 'the end' for something that has been a part of your life for such a long time, so I all hope you enjoyed reading this little story as much as I enjoyed writing it.

A thank you to everybody who reviewed: *Latisha C, Keldore, AngelaStarCat, Shadowed Rains, Lord Anime, M. R. Moore, doesntmatter2u, Irish Anor, ogerhunter, Vegita43, kira66, draconis05, Lierian, Killer916, Grey8, kodomo, Nymph14, alwaysariyana, sasqch, KrazeyForever, EugeBlack, AzureSky123, Gathac, killerorange, Shadow King77, tennisprincess15, emortis13, JerseyPike, Shinteo-5, Manraviel, Brandy.*

I'll be emailing everybody who's made it to the epilogue with my thanks and answering their questions in the course of this week, so, you can expect an email from me. ;)